Women and Work in Malaysia: Negotiating the Private and Public Place[1]

Rohaiza Rokis

Abstract

Malaysia is fast becoming a modern, industrial nation with multinational and global interests, thus one would expect modern thinking to be influencing Malaysian society today. However, the effect of globalisation has a slow effect on some women in Malaysia. In the areas of work and home, cultural traditions have significantly affected women's lives. Working women in Malaysia face a conflicting situation between the need to participate in employment and the need to conform to the cultural expectations on women's responsibilities at home.

The theme of this paper is about paradoxical duality. It discusses the paradoxical situations of the private and public place, which most working women experience in life. Specifically, it explains the paradoxical clash of modernisation of the country with the conservative practice of the nation, which frequently mistreats women.

This paper attempts to understand how cultural traditions penetrate into women's life in Malaysia. It elaborates the influence of religions and cultural traditions women's lives. This eventually creates a paradoxical image and a clashing position of women in public and private space.

Key words: women / work/ modernisation / cultural traditions / social expectations

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Introduction

Even though women's lives are more integrated nowadays, they are also fragmented. My study[2] attempts to explore the paradoxical duality issues relating to the unresolved dilemmas of women on the tightrope between home and the workplace. In general, employment activity enhances women's economic independence. It also influences negotiations about the divisions of labour in the home. But specifically in Malaysia, this situation concerns the issue about the conflict of priority, in which seems to challenge the traditional gender role of a woman, wife, mother and homemaker. What could happen when family commitments come into conflict with the demands of employment? When the two seem incompatible, which one gets priority?

In this paper I attempt to verify my research hypothesis that globalisation, which Malaysia comes into contact with, unable to discharge the authority of the traditional social expectation on women in general. Some elements of patriarchy over women especially in relation to work and home exist and still persist. In the final section, I would like to suggest few observations for the policy makers in Malaysia so that we – especially the women – can move forward for the betterment of all.

The research questions are *"in relation to the traditional culture, how do employed women in Malaysia progress, in line with industrialisation in the global economy? How do they integrate these economic changes with the demands at the workplace and home".* My study investigates this phenomenon particularly in finding out in what ways the traditional system breathes in the workplace and home, and how it affects women's life. It assesses the dominance of cultural traditions over women in the areas of workplace and home in Malaysia.

Apparently, having to live inside the framework of male cultural interests, employed women in Malaysia have to endure few flaws. It is observed that the changing traditional social structure has been lagged behind by the rapid transformation of the country. It is found that most women in Malaysia still endure the grudge of some ill-sided traditional culture in a modernised Malaysia.

The traditional image of Malay women seems to be paradoxical. In many ways, she is the manager of the house as well as the decision-maker but still obedient to her husband as the head of the family. She is working for the money but still the husband is recognised as the family provider and responsible for her upkeep. Apparently, this is not only happening to Malaysia. Siltanen [1994] found in the British household that although women contribute financially, their husbands' money would always be the main financial source.

The case of women, work and home is already inconsistent but it is more complicated when religion and *adat*[3], the two main contributors to Malay culture, are

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[2] It is based on my Ph.D. research project, which was completed at the University of Bristol, United Kingdom, in September 2004.

[3] *Adat* represents the formal and conscious beliefs of the Malays from which one could trace cultural and social production of ideas and relations in the wider society. Society on the other hand expected members to be abide by *adat* or they would face social stigma.

also attributed to the situation. Obviously both substances entwine each other. Since there is no definite interpretation of gender relations in Islamic discussion, the male interests' perspective has filled up the gap to dominate the general outlook of the society that shapes the Malaysian way of life [Abaza. 2002]. Cultural inhibitions such as the belief that a woman's primary role is in the home or that women must take second place to men at the workplace are still strong [Noraini. 2001].

Methods

In order to choose my sample[4], selected one well-established high technology organisation, which I named as PetCo. The company employed women and admitted them to work at high positions.

Choosing women who work in a high technology company like PetCo is paradoxical because they represent the minority of women who have the opportunity to be involved in the petrochemical industry, and furthermore have the chance to occupy at high-ranking position as engineers and professionals. The paradoxical element is further extended with the study on their private life at home.

My study encompassed both qualitative and quantitative approaches in hoping to explore the issue in detail. The quantitative methods alone maybe unable to capture the issue of women, work and family, and thus interviews are best used to support the debate [Brannen and Moss. 1988: Denzin and Lincoln. 1994]. May [1997] views that *"the validity of an interview is greater than its disadvantageous position, as the depth of data collected can give a more thorough individualisation of a respondent's thought than a questionnaire"* [ibid; 109-131]. His views proved to be true, as the data obtained from the interviews have strengthened the data acquired from the questionnaires. The participant observation enables me to understand the physical setting and the working atmosphere of the company.

In this paper, I used a specific reference in distinguishing the research sample. For example the 'respondents' were the questionnaire sample; the 'interviewees' were the interview sample; the 'participants' were used when I referred to the general sample of my study.

Women's Employment in the Industrialised yet Patriarchal Malaysia

This paper assumes that the unresolved questions of career and home experienced by women are derived from the continuation of the traditional patriarchal practices in Malaysia [Jamilah. 1999: Jamilah et. al. 1996]. Patriarchy is a form of social organisation in which a male (the patriarch) acts as the head of the family or household who holds power over females and children [Walby. 1990: 1986]. In this social system, men

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[4] *In this project paper I applied the survey method using questionnaires (N=259) and interviews (N=34) as well as the participant observation.*

achieve and maintain social, cultural and economic dominance over females and younger male members.

According to Tinker, [1976; 24] *"development has tended to put obstacles in women's way that frequently prevent them from maintaining what little economic independence they do have...{as} compared to men, women almost universally have lost as development has proceeded"*. Many economic development plans in Malaysia had not succeeded in benefiting its women population [Jamilah. 1994a]. As men were genetically seen as the leader and head of the family as well as the protector of their women, various development projects in Malaysia were allocated specifically for men assuming that these men will share these development benefits with their womenfolk [Jamilah. 1992a]. It is clear that this assumption has not reached the target whereby further gender complications existed [Ismail and Saha. 1993: Jamilah. 1992b: Paukert. et. al. 1981: Rokiah. 1996: Sha'bah. 1997].

It is true to say that since Malaysia attained its independence in 31st August 1957, the influence of patriarchal value in various aspects of life has been waning [Intan. 1996: Jamilah. 1995]. There was no overt opposition for women to participate in the development of the nation. Yet, there is one specific aspect in Malaysia that seems to be quite unchanging over the time – the social picture of the traditional culture on women, work and the family is very much the same throughout decades. Malaysian traditional culture has ordained that if a woman is married, it is a well-known fact that her job is to care and manage the home. If a woman is single, she is encouraged to get married and establish a family of her own. Whether she is employed or not in the labour force is less important, but if she is married and at the same time also working, it is her responsibility to see the smooth functioning of her family maintenance, and equally to manage their jobs at the workplace. These are the societal expectations, which become a social dilemma to some women.

In a Malaysian context, a failure to attend to those basic familial arrangements may imply that she is incapable for her role as a wife and mother in her own home. Coincidentally, some patriarchy pattern seems to be about "the guardian of morality" because they took it upon themselves to ensure that mothers were taking their 'rightful' place at home looking after the children [Rohana. 1997: Wazir-Jahan. 1998]. Malaysian women are living in their everyday lives in a context in which the 'family' is highly politicised. There are frequent debates in the media and by the politicians about the implications of women go out working and about the pressures and costs of juggling work and home [Lie and Lund. 1994]. In the last few years, there has been a nation-wide moral panic about the role of working mothers in producing delinquent children [Jamilah and Louis. 2001]. Also there was widespread anxiety about social problems of the teenagers such as loafing in shopping centres and having free sexual relationship [Aminah and Narimah. 1992].

Frequently, the working mothers were to be blamed for failing to instil good values for children to become responsible citizens in their adult time [The New Straits Times. 24th July 2001]. Surprising enough, the most recent study conducted by Jamilah [2001] found more than half of her female respondents hold the belief that society's social problems are rooted in the full-time employment of women outside the home. Many

times the women are caught with the notion of *"it is women responsibility to take care of the family and home"*. It seems women themselves admitted and felt responsible for the failure of the family institution due to their career commitment.

The employment pattern in Malaysia has changed tremendously over the years [Malaysia. 2002]. The structure of labour force in the country that once based on the agricultural production has been revolutionised towards industrial composition [Malaysia. 2001: 1981]. This economic transformation requires many women to participate in the workforce. However, as they are regarded as the contributors to the development of the nation, Malaysian women are also the dominant participants to the private matters at home [Jamilah. 2001: Noraini. 2001: Siti Rohani. 1991].

Since patriarchal model established as one of the main social structure in Malaysia, the next question is what are the patriarchal foundations that form the gender disadvantage phenomenon? My study concentrates on the influence of religion and culture onto women in Malaysia. However, what follows does not pretend to deal systematically nor comprehensively with the cultural traditions on women in Malaysia. It is rather to shed some lights on women's position in the country and the impact of cultural traditions on the society.

Religion and Culture in Women's Employment in a Multiethnic Malaysia

Religion and cultures have many positive aspects in Malaysia. They act as social mechanisms in uniting the population and guiding their morality. However, religion and cultures perpetuate stereotyped gender roles in the form of patriarchal protectionism attitudes to discriminate women [Wazir-Jahan. 1998: 1992].

One needs to understand the traditional religious-cultural systems that exist in Malaysia. Whether it is Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, a subordinate status of women within the household is almost unvarying. Unlike Western societies, which generally pride themselves on being secular, many Asian societies are typically religious and traditional societies, where virtually everything is explained within the constraints of religion, tradition and culture [Beckford. 1989: Smith. 1994].

Since cultures have their own rationale based on the acceptance of each ethnicity in Malaysia, the patriarchal social structure may still operate. The Hindu and Muslim women may see seclusion at home as privileged [Epstein. 1982]. The Chinese family appreciated raising the boys more than girls in a family. In fact most Malaysian communities accept a tradition that allows greater freedom for boys than girls [Jamilah. 2001]. In many occasions, socialisation is followed in accordance to the expressed and perceived gender differences, which are agreed by members of the group. Whether born as Malay, Chinese or Indian, a woman is socialised from a young age to play the roles of a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and a mother to lead a secluded life [Wong. 1981].

Gender distinctions are made in the upbringing of the children. In general, women and men in Malaysia learnt in childhood the respective domains of activity in which

women were identified with a 'domestic' orientation and men with the 'public'. As a daughter approaches puberty, her role becomes distinctively clear. Not only does she provide household help, she also takes the duties of a 'responsible daughter'. While responsibilities are also placed upon the son, he by contrast, is allowed to enjoy a carefree freedom until such time when he takes over family responsibilities (particularly when he establishes his own family unit). These traditional perspectives have to a certain extent had an effect on common people's lives, and women have been an important target group because they are regarded as guardians of moral order and carriers of traditional values [Heyzer et. al. 1989].

For the Malays, the whole conception of Malaysian traditional culture relies on the concept of *adat* or custom, which appears to be influenced by the past and present religions of the Malays [Mahathir. 1970: Wazir-Jahan. 1998: 1990]. The concept of 'good' (or uprightness) by the Malay code ethics might not refer to pleasant but more to be understood as proper[5]. Formality and ritual rite rate very high in the Malay concept of values. To depart from formality is considered "*improper, unbecoming and rude*" [Mahathir. 1970; 157].

In the labour market, culture has an important implication for the development of female industrial development in Malaysia [Wee. 1997]. According to Ong [1990], firms reproduce local cultural norms as a form of control over the female employees who work for them. Ong's analysis demonstrates how old cultural forms and ideas of male-female relations can acquire new meanings and serve new purposes in changed arenas of power and boundary definition [ibid; 387]. Even though they work away from home, young women are still strongly subjected to the existing cultural norms as a form of control [Ku Shamsulbahriah. 1994].

Religious Perspective on Women and Work

A majority of the participants in my study are Muslims. For them, everything in life should be done within the religious perspective. In many cases, the respondents affiliated the idealism of working with an unscientific religious explanation. Some respondents specified at a greater depth the association of work with Islamic paradigms. They believed that work was an act of *ibadah*. Most of their answers are reflected in the pledge to contribute to the nation and society. One respondent wrote, "*Work is an ibadah to me. I work so that I can pay the zakat (i.e. alms) to the society*".

It is equally interesting to correlate the factors of money-interest with religious-affiliation among the participants of my study. As previously been discussed, the importance of financial matter turned out to be a common motivation in work. Earning wages has become a security link to various conditions particularly the emotion when family disaster occurs as well as a material comfort in coping with the lifestyle. Most fascinatingly to note here that some of them attached religious perspectives such as perform-

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[5] *Normally to be well thought of what is good for the community is also assumed to be good to the individual (because generally an individual is regarded as secondary to the community).*

ing *hajj* to Makkah as their motivational factor to work. A respondent in her question-naire booklet wrote, *"I work so that I can earn some money. When the time comes, I can use the money that I earned to go to Makkah for hajj"*. Likewise another respondent viewed that a work she has now *"can fulfil my dream to perform hajj in Makkah"*. Obviously religious jurisdictions are significant to most participants. They would corroborate to the teachings of the religion in every aspect of life.

Additionally, my study also revealed a strong religious commitment practised among most interviewees. To the general understanding, Islam said that a wife who wants to work outside the home ought to get her husband's permission. An interviewee said,

> *"I think (we) need to give priority to what Islam has said. Islam says we need to be a good wife and obey our husbands. (Thus) we need to **seek husbands' approval if we want to work**. (That is why) nowadays **when you have decided to settle down, you need to make sure that he lets you working**".*

To be a good wife is a societal expectation that married women should adhere to. In the above quotation, she also advised the unmarried women to establish a sort of 'contract' with the husband-to-be about working outside home.

As the philosophical concept of 'reward' and 'punishment' is the main essence of religious life, most interviewees had positively associated their contribution to the family, which therefore made them contented. An interviewee elaborated,

> *"I feel more meaningful **to serve** my husband (and family), **do all the necessary things for him**. After all it is the easiest chance for me **to get the reward** (laugh). (By) thinking that way, I feel more satisfied".*

Attending to the needs of the husband is one of the ways for the wife to get this reward. The way she laugh while elaborating her relation with her husband might show her disturbed feeling towards this household arrangement. However, she managed to justify this scenario with the concept of religious reward. Acquiring religious reward is the main target of every Muslim.

Apparently at this point, people might view that religion is interpreted in various different ways. The argument might say that many practices are religious, but with a slightly different degree of depth where religious actions were not strictly laid down. This scenario happens because frequently religious justifications were lost to male dominance traditions that imposed women's place at home.

Islam has never said that women should not get involved in paid work [Ling. 1991]. However, the structure of Malaysian Muslim society is synonymously equal to a male-dominance society [Zainah. 1991]. Thus, it tended to restrain women to the private space. For example, before the midpoint of the twentieth century, Malay women have almost been barred from participating in the employment force. Only after the Second World War especially after the 1957 Independence, they were gradually allowed to work outside home [Ahmad. 1993].

In many incidents throughout the fieldwork, I found that Islam is also being used as justification for women to work due to a sheer necessity of it. However, issues of women at work become complicated when the Malay *adat* further enhanced the notion of female's place in the private world of home.

Adat in the Family Structure and Employment

On the basis of societal expectations, marriage and children are important for the well being of the women and the continuity of the society. According to Baginda [1986], a Malay woman is essentially without status until she is married and has children. Children are therefore are viewed as assets and security for parents in times of old age [Malaysia. 2003: Tengku Aizan. 1998].

The traditional sex-typed division of family labour dictates women's primary responsibility to the housework and children, even if they are in the employment. Despite the obvious commitment that women have to their children and the amount of energy they spent in trying to organise their families, they were often left with a sense of guilt that they were not done enough [Jamilah. 1992c: Stivens. 1998a]. Furthermore, women are likely to be made to feel guilty by the society if these home-related responsibilities are not properly attended [Jamilah. 1994b]. An interviewee experienced a problem raised by the in-laws.

> "My mother-in-law is a full time housewife. She can't understand what I'm having through. I've tried my best manage the household. She is too busy body towards what she called the welfare of his son and grandchild. That makes me **guilty** and angry too. I always tell my husband to inform his mother not to interfere in our (family) life".

The clash between the older and younger generation in looking at family life is frequent to happen and not easy to solve. Due to different socialisation exposure, generally the previous generation was more restricted in the upbringing thus had a stronger traditional familial view [Raja Rohani. 1991]. The latter generation was exposed to the current changes in life such as getting education and joining the workforce. Due to the different experiences they had, disagreement in parenting style and other familial issues often occurred.

Additionally, different employment status either a full time housewife or employed determines her perception towards another woman. The emotion of an employed woman was easily distracted when receiving negative comments from others. An interviewee faced a problem with the nosy neighbours, who were the housewives,

> "My neighbours (i.e. full time housewives) feel strange to see me went out here and there (for outstation), or I drive my car and my husband drive his. They ask how can we live like this. It's a bit **nuisances** to me that make me **stress**".

As they never had any experiences in the employment, full time housewives might not able to understand the situation in which women workers had to face. Most employed

mother already depressed with their inability to manage the two spheres of life. Negative remarks from others only intensified to their vulnerable feeling.

Conventional Perspectives on Women, Work and Home

Representations of family in the last decade have been embedded within a larger 'Asian family' structure that strongly supported by Islamic elements of the country [Stivens. 1998b]. Asian ethics and morality are to provide a buffer against the undesirable aspects of modernisation. The Government campaigns about 'happy families' of recent years have a crudely patriarchal model of family life with the father as the head and protector of the family and the mother as a warm and supportive helpmeet.

Even though the social structure of patriarchal elements in the private life might have shrivelled in Malaysia and men have not really insisted that the masculine power must continue, women themselves would like to be attached to home and therefore found happiness there [Nik Safiah. 1992]. It was fundamentally important to lay emphasis on the influence of conventional idealism in Malaysia whereby husbands were the head of the family [Jamilah. 2001], and the roles of the wives were complementing of the husbands [Chang. 1992: Siti Rohani. 1991].

A question on the gender role perspectives in work and the family was asked to the respondents. Almost 59 per cent of them agreed and only 17 per cent disagreed the statement that husband should be regarded as the principal breadwinner of the family and the wife as the primary house manager. In the same vein, the latest research conducted by Jamilah [2001] has seen the recognition of husband as the leader of the family even in cases when he is not the main breadwinner.

One of the aims of my study is to know the degree of respondents' commitment to work when most of their life is influenced by the traditional and religious values. Apparently some married interviewees (including a few singles) viewed that work was good for them but most importantly they should ask the permission from their husbands (or husband-to-be) to work outside home. Whatever the decision was, they would be submissive to their men's wishes.

In spite of earning more money than their husbands, if a crisis of priority occurred, they would definitely choose the family than a career. Although she was still single, an interviewee admitted, *"If my husband says no (to work) then it means I can't work (laugh)"*, which meant that she would quit working if her husband disapproved her to work. Looking deeply at the way she elaborate the situation with a quick laughter, one might wonder whether she was true to her words to quit working or just wanted to conform to the societal expectation of obeying the husbands. My study has no way to measure the sincerity of her response. However, she appeared to have an easy solution for a seemingly complicated issue. Her predetermination to stop working if she received discouragement from her husband was indeed a conventional view in looking at career, which shared by some thousands other women in Malaysia.

To scrutinise deeper on the traditional value, the interview question was fortified

with a well-known Malay traditional proverb to know the correlation of woman and her place in the kitchen. Literally, the proverb was translated into English, *"even though a woman receives a high education or has a good career, she will still end up in the kitchen.* Without difficulty, twenty-five interviewees including the non-Malays (83 per cent) understood the meaning of that particular proverb and accepted the idea of placing kitchen as a 'supposedly' woman's place. An interviewee who was single supported the proverb,

> *"It is indeed **true**. Even though I have a high educational qualification, I still have to go to the kitchen. It is **expected for me**, but it not so for my brother. So I think 'yes' women's place is somehow still at the kitchen".*

To include myself as an example, another interviewee narrowed this cultural association of women's place in the kitchen to the religious paradigm, in which she commented,

> *"I still believed that even though you get your Ph.D., when you're at home you're still a wife, you still have to go to the kitchen (laugh). I think it goes back to our religion. Our duty is to serve the husband. So I guess part of it comes from that".*

My position of a woman who was attempting to obtain a Ph.D. degree was been used as a measurement that well-educated women in general should not consider education as a way to ignore female natural requirement to cook. Thus, the kitchen could be 'appropriate' place for women.

Conventional view is strong among the Malays in which morality is still regarded as indispensable elements to society [Stivens. 2000: Wazir-Jahan. 1998]. However, there are also evidences of reorienting this moral conservatism, which emerge the revolutionised idea of women's roles at home. An interviewee had a different explanation altogether on this particular proverb that establishing kitchen as a woman's place. She blamed on the Malaysian patriarchal social system that misplaced the position of women to the advantage of men. She even regarded this practice as non-Islamic. According to her,

> *"What we practice is **wrong**. Actually it should not be like that. Cooking is in fact men's duty. It is one of men's responsibilities in taking care of the family and home. Men should provide domestic help to the wives (even though if the wife is a full time housewife) so that they should never be over burdened with work at home. **But our culture puts it the other way round. Society only emphasised on whatever seemed to benefit the men**. They will use religious laws if that would benefit men. They might change it to traditional culture if that benefits men. So in the end, women are seen to hold more responsibilities at home. This is **not right** at all. This is **not Islamic** at all".*

Briefly what she was trying to say was that gender inequality in work and the home remain unquestioned due to the patriarchal structure of the society. The interpretation of women's role at home and work is greatly justified by male interests' perspective. If certain thing such as money would be to their benefit, men would agree that their

women could work. However, if work outside home meant that men have to share doing household chores, then they might oppose work for women. The above quote illustrated how patriarchal traditions, which were seen non-Islamic was used by men to serve their dominance over women.

More than one-third of the respondents in my study disagreed that women could achieve an equal status with their men if they were working. Although this statement was referring to the social value attached to the concept of equality, a particular respondent elaborated, *"women can never be equal to their husband but at least we should have a fair relationship"*. Her response might be looked from the physical factors possessed by the men. Physically, men in general are stronger than women. However, it should not be a decisive factor to treat women unequally in the private life because they were also the economic contributors [Elson. 1996].

I asked the Government officer about the need for women and men to be equal to each other. She asked me back,

"What is equality? Equality in what sense? Equality in a perspective of Malaysia is tremendously different from the equality from a western perspective. People over there fighting for equality without particular directions. For example if men have muscle they want muscle too. They thought muscle is a symbol of strength. As a result more women are seen becoming muscular. Clearly this is against our religion, our tradition. Men and women should have a clear-cut distinction between them".

Her strong antagonistic sentiment had not exactly answered to my question. What I really needed to know was about the degree of gender equality between both sexes in Malaysia. What is women's position compared to men? Where do they feel equal, where do they feel satisfied in life? I immediately restructured the question on the male superiority in the society. She then admitted,

"Men in Malaysia are a bit superior. Before, the Government didn't even aware of the issues of women and gender in the development programmes and planning. Every project was about men and for men. Looked at the poverty alleviating programmes in the 50s and 60s, nothing about women and for women at all. At least we can see positive actions now. In fact the establishment of this ministry is meant entirely for women. So gradually we (in the ministry) can change the situation. One of the objectives in this ministry is to create a sense of superiority to men as well as to women. Maybe in some aspects men should be in front and in other aspects women should be pushed forward".

This quotation has a significant implication to my study, because it provided a historical record of the programmes undertook by the Malaysian Government to get women involved in the nation's development. She verified that Malaysian women were neglected before (and immediately after) the Independence. As time went by, there was a demonstration of a gradual but surely for women to progress [Kanitta. 2001: Ministry of Women Affairs and Development. 2002].

In addition, even though a particular interviewee was just five months working with the company, she said that she would definitely quit her job once her working contract[6] expired because she wanted to dedicate herself to home, husband and caring for the children.

*"Frankly speaking I **do not want** to work. The main reason I work is because PetCo sponsored me, and I have to serve my 7-year contract. I'm **not interested** to work but I'm more interested to concentrate on family".*

Apparently, a total abandonment of work for family (as the above case) still exists. Some women are unselfishly dedicating their life for the benefits of others. The attitude of the participants in my study could be considered to be altruism that concerned for the welfare of other rather than oneself. Altruism was coined to the work of Comte who saw the evolution of society towards humanistic values [Lenzer. 1983], in which maternal behaviour has the effect in taking care one's kin [Rushton and Sorrentino. 1981].

Altruistic attitude was enhanced by the cultural expectations in Malaysia that the main place of women and mothers should be in a secured private domain of home with the family [Stivens. 1998a]. To explain this situation, the work of Noraini [2001] on women's religiosity with their altruistic attitude was relevantly important, in which she justified that the believe in religion, to some extent, might help women in coping with the difficulties of life. Religion reduced the impact of stress and prevented the psychological distress that might result from stressful experience [Idler. 1987].

When I asked in the interview, *"If there is a clash of priority between work and home, which place do you choose?"* Married female interviewees expressed quitting the job more often than the single ones. Still, when the same question was asked to the unmarried interviewees, they usually said that family was so dear to them and might quit working, if the clash persisted.

The dilemma to choose either home or career, which were dear to some women, would be a dramatic event in their life. As a direct result of this phenomenon, Jamilah [1994b] has reported that women with high levels of education are more likely to remain unmarried as compared to those with little or no schooling. This scenario may have an implicit effect that reveals their actual uneasiness towards having the double-burden responsibility. Many newspaper articles of lately reported the disinterest among the singles to get married. One of the reasons quoted was being 'afraid' of the domestic responsibility waiting them at home [The New Straits Times. 4th December 2001: 10th November 2001].

In brief, the eccentricity of the cultural values sustains even with a strong influence of globalisation process. Women involved in the labour force [Kaur. 2000], but their perception towards home and family still might not change a lot. In addition, when some of them thought that career was a thing they pursue in life, marriage ended to be

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[6] *Most PetCo's engineers were sponsored students who are by the terms of their contract, are bonded to seven years working with the company. Failure to obey the contract may force them to face a full repayment of their study expenditure.*

delayed. It may be difficult for women to outshine in both spaces.

The previous pages elaborated some general discussions about the position of women, especially the working ones in Malaysia. Follows below are some observations about women, which may directly relevant to the policy-makers in this country.

Policies-relevant Issues for Women

My study suggests a typical pattern for the married employed women to favour family life rather than employment, particularly when a clash of priorities occurred. As for the women in my study, despite the modern attitudes displayed by them, many still held to the conventional attitudes, which supported the sexual division of labour and condoned the subordinate position of women. Sizeable numbers of interviewees still believe in distinctive gender roles and patterns of behaviour, which overwhelmingly keep men in their privileged position.

Based on the answers from the participants, I assumed that the conflicts of work and family roles exist due to the intertwining effects of religions and *adat*. Due to the inadequacy of explicit interpretation of gender relations in Islamic discussion [Abaza. 2002], the patriarchal elements have influenced the structural pattern of the society. The illustrations from my study showed how patriarchal elements have been used to control women. A few participants had begun with difficulty to challenge the patriarchal elements. The authority of cultural traditions and values is even now still strong. Women tended to go along with the rules of society, even though it was not to their overall benefit.

On the basis of my study, it is therefore important for the Government to advocate policies in obtaining wider and fuller acceptance for women to work. To achieve this, fundamental changes are needed in the cultural system. At the moment, cultural attitudes towards women's work and reproductive roles tend to reinforce social barriers for most women. A paradigm shift regarding the potential women's role in economic development for a patriarchal society like Malaysia is necessary. It could chip away certain cultural bias and religious bigotry against women in the workplace. Mohamed Bakri [1999] urged the modernisation of Malaysia by narrowing down the authority of religious and cultural aspects. They need to recapture the Quranic culture of openness and freedom by challenging obsolete knowledge systems, particularly on inferiority and the secondary position of women.

Many women want a more egalitarian environment, but somehow it is believed that family and home restrains them from going further in the labour force. This female dilemma will remain until society has adjusted, mentally and materially, to a new condition whereby it is possible for women to satisfactorily combine the pursuit of a chosen career with marriage and family life. Only then, will the appeal of a traditional maternal role and hopes of marriage cease to be in acute conflict with more economic considerations.

To reinforce roles for women is a backward step. As I have found, improvements

to assist women at work and home are needed. If establishing marriage, managing the household and caring for children are the things expected by society, then members of society should promote these to the level of social interest. The responsibility of administering home affairs as well as giving birth and bringing up children that rests on women's shoulders is by no means a private and domestic matter. Moreover, they should no longer be a sole woman's responsibility, but a shared responsibility of both men and women. The Government should be looking into eliminating discrimination by breaking stereotypes and freeing women from their traditional roles.

In line with the objectives of the research, I identified a number of constraints that restricted the involvement of women in economic activities. Among them are:

- The dual and often competing responsibilities of family and career restrict the mobility and participation of women in the labour market, and demonstrate women's orientation towards family responsibilities rather than paid work.
- Some patriarchal elements in Malaysia that derive from culture and religion downplay women's contribution to economic development.
- Social prejudices, together with the altruistic attitude of women regarding the role and status of women in employment and at home limit their involvement in economic activities.
- In general, employed women experience unfair wife-husband roles in household management. The wives' position as a significant financial contributor to the family does not award them equal status with their husbands. The husbands are always regarded as the head of the family holding the power to make major family decisions.

Conclusion

My study attempts to provide a current discussion about the paradoxical situation of women in the workforce and home in Malaysia. The employed women still have to endure the burden at both places [Rohana. 2003]. The development of industrialisation and the impact of globalisation required for women's participation in the workforce but the cultural traditions repressed them in the private domain of home. Women are unhappy with this repressive circumstance but some accept (or reluctantly obey) it due to the authoritative influence of various religious interpretations and cultural justifications under the reign of patriarchal society.

It is therefore important to stress that the traditional belief and practices are still strong in Malaysia. Kahn [1998] has seen the peculiarity of the Asian values[7], which was still been preserved even with a strong pressure coming from various social forces. Globalisation did change Malaysian women in certain extent, for instance their increase participation in the employment sector but in other aspect related to home and family, they still adopt to the traditional values. Cultural traditions have changed

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[7] *Within the Malaysian context, these Asian values could be translated into the religious and traditional cultures of the society.*

throughout times, but their changes arrived in a subtle manner, which would not upset the order of Malaysian society.

My study could not under estimate the power of cultural traditions in Malaysia. The acceptance of conventional views and the recognition of modernised perspectives exist side by side. Apparently, the modernised version of looking at life is trying to peep through the way of the traditional boundary [Shamsul. 2001]. As it has shown in my study, whenever interviewees seemed to agree in the conventional perspective, they might actually believe differently, yet it was well hidden because they did not want to show the unexpected attitudes about the cultural traditions. However, every now and then their responses flew unchecked in which they blurted their inner conflicting perspectives of being conventionalist that acknowledged the cultural traditions and being modernised that provoked any sort of cultural injustices to women. My study envisages that women are inclined to perceive the latter perspective. However, they only perceived the former perspective because they fear that they might aggravate the 'normality of the situation' of the Malaysian context. One aspect that reinforced this situation was due to their altruistic attitude towards cultural traditions particularly when it involved the family and home.

It is not the position in my study to perceive the influence of cultural traditions negatively because most aspects of cultural traditions particularly beliefs, societal norms, morality and mores are generally considered to be good [Wazir-Jahan. 1992]. In fact, they uniquely characterise the Malaysian way of life and thus guided people in every sense [Stivens. 2000]. However, these cultural paradigms frequently are contradictory in an era globalisation in Malaysia.

I have identified the real exigency this kind of research in Malaysia. It seems that only lately has the Government dedicated its efforts and resources to include issues on the progress and development of female workers. The unavailability of the very latest and contemporary sources on women and employment in this country is really crucial, and has consequently affected the development and welfare of women. In particular, I hoped to disclose the general patterns of women's workforce situation in Malaysia, as well as the current practice of household management among the dual-earners in a family. Finally, my study has shown the positive contribution of Malaysian women in the economy and the household. However, it has highlighted the strains and tensions women face in fulfilling their two roles. Support from the Government, employers and husbands is needed to help women to achieve their full potential and resolve the dilemmas of work and home.

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