

MUSLIM WOMEN EDUCATION AND GLOBALIZATION: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multicultural country with a population of 28.78 million in 2010. Muslims form the majority of the population. Since all Malays are defined as Muslims by the Constitution of Malaysia, thus the education of Muslim women is referred to as the education of Malay girls, who receive their education either in government or government-aided schools. This article discusses the nature and process of education among Muslim women in Malaysia. To achieve this, the article outlines the participation patterns of girls and women at the secondary and higher levels of education, discusses education and training provided for them in the job market, and responsible positions available for women in the economic, social and political sectors. Finally, the article examines some problems faced by Muslim women in the context of Malaysia's current development needs in fulfilling its vision of becoming a fully developed country by year 2020. One of the limitations of this article is in reporting the statistics on Muslim women's education, because almost all educational statistics are not desegregated by religious affiliation or ethnic origin, but are often described on general rather than on specific terms.

Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural country with a total population of 23,274,690 million (census count in 2000) with a projected population of 28.78 million in 2010. The Malays comprise approximately 55.1 percent, Chinese 24.3 percent, Indian 7.4 percent, other Bumiputeras 11.9 percent and others 1.3 percent of the Malaysian population. Unlike most other countries in South East Asia, Muslims form the majority of the population in Malaysia, except for Indonesia which has the most congested Muslim population in the world, representing about 13 percent of the 1.3 billion Muslims around the world (Mazlan 2010).

Since all Malays are Muslims, the religion of Islam is practiced by over 60.4 percent of the Malaysian population. Constitutionally, Islam is the official religion of Malaysia by virtue

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of Article 3(1) Federal Constitution. However, there is freedom to practice other religions such as Buddhism (19.2%), Hinduism (6.3%), Christianity (9.1%), and Confucianism (2.6%) as guaranteed in the Federal Constitution. Out of the total Muslim population in the country, women make up 26.9 percent (Population and Housing Census 2000). Because of this sizeable number, the issue of women and education merits analysis, more so because Malaysia does not practice discrimination on the basis of gender and women are acknowledged to be of equal status to men.

This article offers a series of observations on the nature and process of education for Muslim women as they advance to claim their place in society. By definition, Muslims refer to those who profess Islam as their religion. Although there are non-Malays such as Chinese, Indians and others who are Muslims; all Malays are Muslims. Therefore, in general when we discuss the education of Muslim girls, we are in actual fact referring to the education of Malay girls who attend mainstream education where both secular and religious subjects are offered. Similar to other ethnic and religious groups, most Muslim girls and women receive their education in government or government-aided schools commonly known as the national or national-type schools. However, a minority, of approximately 1.5 percent, is enrolled in Islamic religious schools usually controlled by the state and federal governments or run by private foundations and individuals.

Islamic education is different from Western modern education since Islamic education is centered on the Divine Book, the Koran and the focus of education is therefore on literacy to enable a Muslims to read, understand, copy and expound the tenets of Islam derived from Divine Revelation (Ghazy Mujahid 1987). For the purposes of formal learning, the *masjid* or mosques and the *maktab* or schools are commonly used. Often, the *maktab* is attached to the *masjid*, symbolizing very distinctly religious obligations pertaining to the acquisition of knowledge. The crux of Islamic education is both knowledge and faith, or the certainty (*yaqin*) of the true position of the human being in the universe in relation to *Allah* The Creator. Education aims at developing the individual capacity to work efficiently as a social being. In Malaysia, according to Educational Statistics (January 2010), there are basically four categories of religious schools: (i) Peoples' Religious Schools (34 schools of *Sekolah Rendah Agama Rakyat* and 134 schools of *Sekolah Menengah Agama Rakyat*; (ii) State Religious Schools (28 schools of *Sekolah Rendah Agama Negeri*; and 86 schools of *Sekolah Menengah Agama Negeri*); (iii) Religious Schools run by private institutions (18 schools of *Sekolah Rendah Agama Swasta* and 14 schools of *Sekolah Menengah Agama Swasta*; and (iv) Religious Schools run by the Ministry of Education (55 schools of *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* and 140 schools of *Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan*).

At present, there are 470 religious schools with total students of 7327 students in upper secondary, of which 62.8 percent are girls and 37.2 percent are boys. The focus of teaching in these religious schools is on preparing students for the government

examinations, the Junior School Certificate or the Malaysian School Certificate. At the same time the schools are provided with an environment that applies directly and systematically the principles of Islam. Students receive in greater depth the teachings of the Koran and the *Sunnah* and are taught more subjects pertaining to Islam compared to the regular schools. Such subjects include Syariah, Arabic Communication, and Advanced Arabic Language.

In the national schools, the general philosophy of the curriculum is to provide children with a basic education with an emphasis on teaching the skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, as well as computer literacy. Schooling also has as a purpose, the development of desirable attitudes and behaviors based on acceptable, societal moral and ethical values. All Muslim children are required to follow Islamic religious studies including knowledge of *Fiqh*, *Tauhid* and Islamic History; while non-Muslim children receive moral education. Apart from learning Islamic religion as a subject, students are permitted to take subjects such as basic or advanced Arabic language.

Thus, it can be observed that Islamic education in Malaysia is not the sole prerogative of traditional Islamic schools. It is simultaneously offered in mainstream education of national schools with subjects which are worldly-based or scientific and technological in origin. To ensure there is no dichotomy between the two types of education, the national curriculum was revised in 1983. A new integrated curriculum was subsequently used at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling. The new integrated curriculum emphasizes the three main educational domains: cognitive, skills, and in particular, the affective domain which stresses spiritual values.

In most universities and colleges in Malaysia, Islamic studies are offered as specializations, and subjects such as Islamic Civilization are taught to all undergraduates. The International Islamic University, the Islamic Teacher Training Institute, and the Malaysian Islamic University College were established in recognition of Malaysia's efforts in promoting Islam.

The Education Of Muslim Women

Prior to independence in 1957, the status of Malay Muslim women was lower than that of men. Malay women were socialized early into subordination and girls had little freedom. The first Malay school for Malay Muslim girls, which was patterned after the western system, opened in 1884 with an enrolment of 60 students (Robiah Sidin 1996). Attendance of girls, however was poor because of social, religious and geographical reasons. More often than not, schools were built at a distance from the students' homes. In addition, there was parental bias against formal education for both girls and boys. Secular schools, both in the vernacular and in English, were established by Christian missionaries and private individuals.

After independence in 1957, a national education policy was introduced through the Education Act of 1961, where the government promised to provide a place in school for each native-born child (Education Act 1961). A national system of education was developed with *Bahasa Malaysia* as the language of instruction. The main objective of education was to promote national integration among the ethnic groups and to instill in the citizens a sense of loyalty and pride in the newly-formed federation.

The Declaration of the United Nations on Human Rights in 1960 further spurred the governments' efforts to expand education opportunities to Malaysians. By 1970, a total of 672,898 girls compared to 748,571 boys were enrolled in all national primary schools. At the secondary school level, 192,113 girls as compared to 275,991 boys enrolled in these schools. The enrollment rate of girls was 84.8 percent at the primary level, 43.6 percent at the lower secondary level and 16.1 percent at the upper secondary level. The percentage of boys in the three levels of schooling was 91.6 percent, 60.6 percent and 23.9 percent respectively (Educational Statistics 1970). When further analyzed by religious affiliations, a total of 84.4 percent of Muslim girls were enrolled in primary and secondary school levels.

Today, there is active participation of girls, including Malay Muslims, in primary education. The statistics show that in 2008, a total of 99.1 percent of children (48.57% girls) aged 6-12 years were enrolled in primary schools; 86.9 percent (50.1% girls) of the 13-17 years age group were in lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools (Educational Statistics 2008). The increase in attendance is due to the national education policy requirement that all children should attend schools irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or geographical background. Beginning in 1995, the government further stipulated that children should be allowed to continue their education up to the secondary level. They should not be barred because of poor performance in school examinations. As a result, Malaysia enjoys a high literacy rate among the young population with 93.9 percent in 2001, 94.0 percent in 2002 and 95.0 percent in 2003, as compared to countries like Thailand (97.7% in 1998), Singapore (95.0% in 2005), and the Philippines (94.0% in 2003).

Education at the primary and lower secondary levels is general in nature whereby students are taught basic literacy, numeric and computer skills, history and culture, languages, moral and religious values as well as living skills. At the upper secondary level, students are divided into academic streams such as science or non-science or technical and vocational streams. Most vocational schools are run by the Ministry of Education although there are also community colleges and training schools run by other government agencies such as MARA and the Ministry of Rural Development. Vocational schools provide students with career skills in areas such engineering, home economics, agriculture and commerce. Technical schools place greater emphasis on technical and scientific subjects.

Vocational and technical education is considered important for both boys and girls because there are many job opportunities available in this field. In 2010, there were 88 vocational and technical schools throughout the country with a population of 42,418 boys and girls (Educational Statistics, January 2010). The breakdown in enrolment of girls and boys is as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Enrolment in Vocational and Technical Schools in Malaysia 2010

Type of Schools	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Technical	19441	65.6	10207	34.4	29648	69.9
Vocational	9479	74.2	3291	25.8	12770	30.1
Total	28920	68.2	13498	31.8	42418	100.0

Source: *Malaysian Educational Statistics, January 2010*

It is interesting to note that there is a distinct pattern in enrolment between the two genders. Girls make up about 31.8 percent of the enrolment, while boys comprise 68.2 percent. There is also an inclination for girls to enroll in traditionally 'feminine' courses such as home economics and commerce, which includes clerical and secretarial skills. Boys are predominantly enrolled in engineering courses, metal crafts and technical skills such as electrical and electronic work, building construction, and welding and metal fabrication. Vocational courses run by other government agencies show a similar pattern of enrolment, and this further reinforces the uneven distribution by gender in vocational and technical education. A similar pattern is recorded in schools run by the Ministry of Education. Nonetheless, an encouraging development has occurred. Female students made up more than a third of the total enrolment in 2009 and about as many in other fields such as engineering, which is normally dominated by male students (See Table 2).

Table 2: Enrolment at Diploma Level in Polytechnic Schools in Malaysia 2009

Types of courses	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Engineering	25953	71.5	10493	28.5	36446	60.3
Architecture / Measurement and Evaluation	1328	52.7	1191	47.3	2519	4.2
Science / Technology	338	33.9	659	66.1	997	1.6
Information Technology & Communication	1539	37.7	2543	62.3	4082	6.7
Accountancy	1109	20.4	4330	79.6	5439	9.0
Business and Management Studies	1362	23.2	4509	76.8	5871	9.7
Service Sector	720	17.4	3423	82.6	4143	6.9
Artistic, Designer and Music	346	35.2	637	64.8	983	1.6
Total	32695	-	27785	-	60480	100.0

In Malaysia, tertiary education is defined as education gained at the matriculation level, teacher training colleges or institutes and degree granting tertiary institutions - the universities, community and university colleges and polytechnics. According to Malaysian Educational Statistics (2009), currently there are 20 public universities and university colleges, 27 teacher training colleges, 43 community colleges, and 27 polytechnics. There are also several local private colleges or universities offering twinning or joint degree programs with universities abroad. Post secondary and college level enrolment represent about 34.9 percent of the 17-23 age groups, whereby 9.07 percent of the 19-24 age groups are at universities. The breakdown by gender is 33.9 percent male students and 66.1 percent female students in post secondary institutions and colleges, while 38.9 percent male and 61.1 percent female students are at universities. Thus, women seem to be far ahead of men in terms of participation in education.

The Ministry of Higher Education, which was specifically established to govern education at the tertiary level, has expressed concern that women are outnumbering men in many courses at the university and college levels. Teacher training programs have been dominated by women over a long period of time (Malaysian Educational Statistics 2009). In 2009 for instance, a total of 26, 248 (69.15%) women as compared to 11,706 (30.85%) men were enrolled in all 27 teacher training institutes. This disparity in gender distribution is likewise reflected in the number of teachers in Malaysia: 277,755 (68.8%) female and 126,227 (31.2%) male teachers.

At university level, women form a majority of the enrolment in various fields of study, as displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Enrolment of women in local universities 2009

Types of courses	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Diploma	33630	40.9	48578	59.1	82208	19.5
First Degree	102119	37.5	169893	62.5	272012	64.8
Post Graduate Diploma	1593	25.6	4637	74.4	6230	1.5
Masters	20575	45.8	24305	54.2	44880	10.7
Doctor of Philosophy	8892	60.6	5777	39.4	14669	3.5
Total	166,809	39.7	253,190	60.3	419,999	100.0

Source: Malaysian Higher Educational Statistics, 2009

What can be inferred from these statistics? First, it suggests that women, including Muslim girls, have seriously taken the opportunities given to them in education. They are able to successfully compete with men, and in many fields are even capable of outperforming them. Unfortunately, the enrolment of women is not evenly distributed in all fields of study. The majority of women are in education, the arts and humanities, law, and dentistry. Many women are still involved in "traditional fields" rather than in engineering,

architecture, survey, town planning, and other similar fields considered as 'male bastions'. This has caused much concern because the focus of the country's development is on industrialization which has a wider application of science and technology.

As in other countries, the trend indicate that at the higher levels of education, there is limited involvement of women. In 2009, according to Malaysian Higher Educational Statistics, women's participation at the doctoral level was only 39.4 percent (5,777) compared to 60.6 percent (8,892) male from a total population of 14,669. However, the enrolment of women far exceeds that of men in the diploma, first degree and post graduate diploma at local universities in the year 2009. At the level of the first degree particularly, the participation of 62.5 percent women (169,893) exceeds that of the 37.5 percent men (102,119) from the total population of 272,012.

Utilization Of Education For Development

Development in Malaysia today is based on the National Vision Policy 2001-2010 embodied in the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010. Its ultimate mission is to attain a fully developed nation status by the year 2020. The main thrusts are not just economic growth, but also national unity and social equity. The creation of a truly developed Malaysian society must be premised not only on a resilient and competitive economy, but also on the basis of equity and inclusion of all groups (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010).

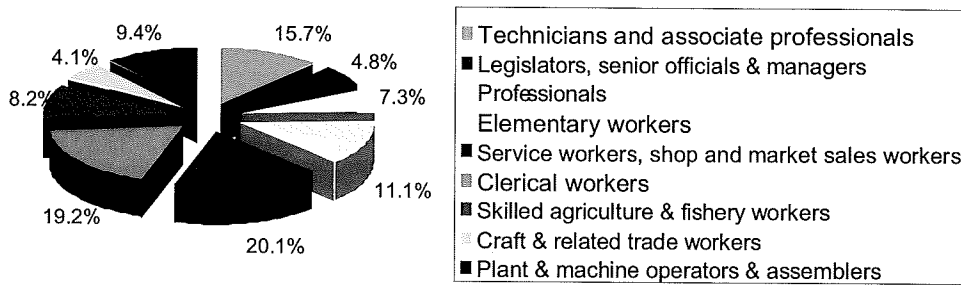
The context of development is also related to meeting the challenges of globalization whereby increasing competitiveness, ability to innovate, to be creative and to communicate efficiently are significant features. A substantive knowledge, skills in Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) and the ability to establish links with global partners are also crucial.

To a greater extent, education changes women's roles and status in society. It helps women to qualify as trained personnel. In addition, economic needs enhance their awareness of their rights and responsibilities in society and prepare them to become leaders. This is true in the case of Muslim women in Malaysia.

The economic growth of the country has concomitantly created more job opportunities for women. Today women account for 63.6 percent of the working age population of 15-64 years. Their participation rate as labor force only increased from 45.7 percent in 2000 to 47.2 percent in 2008. The number employed however, has increased from 3.3 million in 2000 to 3.81 million in 2008 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia).

By sector, women are mainly employed as service workers, shop and market sales workers (20.1%), clerical workers (19.2%) as well as technicians and associate professionals (15.7%). They are least employed in crafts and related trade work (4.1%), legislators, senior officials and managers (4.8%) and professionals (7.3%). In other words,

women's representation by industry are disparate, a few are in light industries while many are in the heavy manufacturing sector. Chart 1 below displays the distribution of female employment by occupation in 2008.



Source: *Statistics of Women, Family and Community, 2009*

Chart 1: Distribution of Female Employment by Occupation 2008

Women's participation has generally increased from the year 2000, especially in services and sales, and many are employed as senior officials and managers as well as professionals. There is a slight reduction of involvement in plant and medicine operations and assembly and agricultural sectors following the national policy changes. But in general, a higher percentage of women are now holding high paying jobs. This includes positions such as doctors, dentists, lawyers and architects. Women have successfully conquered new occupational territories. Some well-known successful women include the Muslim woman scientist, Prof. Datuk Dr. Mazlan Othman the first director general of Malaysia's National Space Agency; the Governor of the Malaysian National Bank, Tan Sri Dr. Zeti Akhtar Aziz, a prominent economist; the Honorable Datuk Sri Siti Norma Yaakob, the chief judge of Malaya; and the first Muslim women Syarie judges appointed in 2010, Suraya Ramli and Rafidah Abdul Razak.

Beside the above involvement, women Malaysians are encouraged to become entrepreneurs and to participate in business and public service. The government has given recognition of women's contributions in the economic and other sectors by promoting more women in decision-making positions, where there was none previously. The distribution of women at decision-making levels in the corporate sector in 2009 is 13 percent. These are women appointed as members of Boards of Directors (President, Vice President, Managing Director, Executive Officer, Chief Operation Officer, Senior General Manager and General Manager). In the public sector, 24.6 percent of women are members among Top Management. (*Statistics of Women, Family and Community, 2009*).

However, seniority requirements and bureaucratic procedures still act as barriers to women's promotions in management positions. For example in the education sector, although 68.1 percent of all secondary teachers are women, only very few are directors of teachers' training institutes. Currently, at the university level only two out of 20 universities has appointed a woman vice-chancellor (July 2011).

Women's participation in politics is another indicator of how women use education and training for self-development. Today, in politics women hold positions as leaders, planners and party workers. Education provides them with the ability and confidence to perform alongside men. Almost all of the women in Malaysian politics today are highly qualified and held professional jobs before taking up political positions. Today, there are two full women ministers, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development and Dato' Seri Dr. Ng Yen Yen, the Minister of Tourism. There are five deputy ministers, namely Senator Dato' Dr. Mashitah Ibrahim (Deputy Minister of Prime Minister Department), Datuk Maznah Mazlan (Deputy Minister of Human Resource), Dato' Rohani Abdul Karim (Deputy Minister for Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism), Puan Rosnah Abdul Rashid Shirlin (Deputy Minister of Health) and Puan Noriah Kasnon (Deputy Minister for Energy, Green Technology and Water). In summary, education has enabled women to climb the ladder of bureaucratic posts and political positions, a feat rarely achieved in many developing countries.

Issues And Discussions

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in discussing the education of Muslim women today.

There are a few possible factors which impede Muslim women's involvement in education in Malaysia. In general, there are neither traditional or cultural practices nor legal requirements which prevent women from participating in all educational opportunities provided. The government of Malaysia places emphasis on equity among races and gender. In fact, the government has passed many laws and regulations to prevent discrimination in education and at work place against women. Thus the environment is conducive for women to claim their rights to education. Parents and society too are generally very supportive of girls in furthering their studies to the highest level in all areas of studies. However female Muslims and others have yet to be fully involved in fields that remain male-dominant such as engineering and technical fields. This is because of past prejudices, lack of knowledge, and limited job opportunities for women. Perhaps these factors have prevented more girls from venturing into these areas up to the present.

Given the clear link between education and training and access to paid employment, Muslim girls and women in Malaysia are able to make positive contributions to national development. Their education is thus extremely relevant; in fact, it has enabled them to take their rightful place in the modern and globalized world.

An issue that can perhaps be raised is in relation to the balance between the secular and the religious content of education at the secondary school as well as higher education levels. As Malaysians forge forward to achieve its target mission of becoming a developed industrialized nation in 2020, there is an awareness that a kind of spiritual vacuum exists among its populace, especially among the Muslims. There is a kind of incongruity between material and moral progress leading to certain social disorders such as excessive materialistic behaviors and consumption of luxury goods, lack of parental piety and the breakdown of the extended family system. Permissiveness and drug abuse among youths are also related to this problem.

The disparity is said to be related to the national system of education which is highly secular than religious-based, and which stresses more on competition than on cooperation among students. A wider and deeper emphasis on the teaching of all aspects of Islam within the education system is therefore needed. In fact, steps already taken today to rectify the weaknesses in education are evidence in support of the existence of weaknesses in the education system today.

In traditional societies, Muslim women have little choice but to become home-makers and caregivers. Usually informal education prepares them for these roles. Presently, in Malaysia, this is something which is missing. Because almost all children attend national schools and follow a common curriculum, subjects such as home economics, physical education and health science, crafts, music and other similar humanistic subjects are not compulsory for all students, rather they are offered as options. In the country's enthusiasm to embrace science and technology, these subjects appear to be somewhat irrelevant for many and are thus given little importance. However, no matter how modern the society, the role of women as home workers has remained unchanged and therefore is regarded as relevant. This need should therefore be addressed concurrently with women's involvement in policy and decision-making positions in both the public and private sectors.

Conclusion

In Malaysia, Muslim girls enjoy equal opportunity and access to education. Their involvement in all sectors of education and training has enabled them to be employed as professionals, skilled workers and production workers as well as entrepreneurs. Fair remuneration practice and employment equity have ensured that these women are able to make good use of their education and as a consequence are fast becoming national leaders on their own merits. Indeed, women's evolving employment opportunities is the most visible indicator of the positive impact of modern education on Muslim women in Malaysia. What needs to be addressed perhaps is to create a healthy balance between the secular content of the national education system and the Islamic content.

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