

# Marriage and Family From the Perspective of Young Female Malay Academics

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**Abstract**— The educational and economic developments were believed has influenced the perception of marriage and family among young generations in many countries around the world, including Malaysia. The aim of this paper is to explore the perceptions of young female Malay academics towards the importance of marriage and family, and its impact on their decisions to marry/to have married. I have recruited two groups of respondents with a small sample size. The first group consists of ten married young Malay academic women and the second group includes five single female academic, who work public universities in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor areas. I utilised a qualitative interview method. One to one in-depth interview were conducted to gather the data in order to gain better understanding of their views about marriage and family life. The findings showed that factors such as religion and culture, as well as psychological and emotional needs influencing their perceptions of marriage and family. With reference to their positive views, this study found that these women still wanted to be committed to their family and their careers simultaneously although their identity as modern, young and educated women.

**Keywords**—Marriage, family, Malay Muslim women, academic women

## I. INTRODUCTION

PREVIOUS studies in many countries around the world, including Malaysia showed that many contemporary and educated women and men have a negative perspective of marriage and on family, while others have found that they tend to remain single or delay marriage [1-9]. The increasing number of women and men with higher academic qualifications and have an independent income, as well as the high cost of living in urban areas were among the major factors that have been identified in relation to this issue.

A study conducted by Jones [3] reveals that over the past two decades, many educated women and men have remained single in most Asian countries, particularly in urban areas. Research in Asian countries has further shown that the nature of Hong Kong families has changed due to marriage being delayed by the women [10]. Similarly, '*bankoka*' or postponement of marriage among Japanese people has been identified happened because of the remarkable changes in the economy, society and culture of Japan [2], as well as 'the changing patterns of modern lifestyles and attitudes towards

marriage, personal obligation, and ambition' [9]. Tokuhiko [9] also found that Japanese women with higher academic attainments tend to delay marriage and only support the idea of a marriage that maintains independence and autonomy between husbands and wives rather than only the husband dominating the family. In some Western countries, where cohabitation has become increasingly acceptable, this was seen as one of the reasons why the younger generations had not only rejected the idea of marriage, but also decided to remain single and postpone marriage [7, 5]. In Malaysia, an earlier study conducted by Anderson et al. [11] found that late marriage bears a significant relation to professional women compared to non-professionals. Ta's [4] study indicates that many highly educated Malay, Chinese and Indian women preferred to focus on their careers, and thus they have either decided to postpone marriage or opted to remain single. For this reason, Abd Rashid [6] claims that ideas of marriage and family are on the decline among the younger generations as many of them believe that it is no longer important, especially for women, when the position of women in society has changed.

He added that late marriage is considered to be one of the critical challenges faced by the family today, where both sexes are equally committed to their education and career goals. This study attempts to explore the perception of marriage and family among young female academics, who work in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor areas as they were considered representing urban, contemporary and professional young women in Malaysia. More specifically, the objectives of this study are (1) to examine the factors influencing their perceptions of marriage and family and how the factors have also influenced their decisions to marry and form a family (2) to find out the age at first marriage among these women.

## II. METHODOLOGY

I used qualitative research methodology and a semi-structured interview as a tool to gather the primary data. In the context of my study, which was an exploratory study, this method offers a researcher to identify the respondents' accounts of factors pertaining their views on marriage and family life, and at the same time find out the age of first marriage among them. Semi-structured interviews enable a researcher to not only understanding the respondents' experiences, but also a researcher can gain more personal information from respondents in relation to their private lives [12-13]. Using the purposive sampling [14], I have recruited two groups of respondents with a small sample size. The first

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group consist of ten married young Malay academic women and the second group includes five single female academics. The women ranged from 24 to 40 years old. This study focuses on female academic women who work in the public universities in the territory of Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. These two urban areas have been chosen because they do not only representing the most modern and metropolitan cities, but also providing many higher educational institutions, job and education opportunities, differences in social stratification, as well as they have Malays as the biggest ethnic group. All the respondents were identified through two different means, namely identified by me as the researcher through my friendship networks and the snowballing technique.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Although the respondents were well-educated, none of them wanted to remain single. They agreed that their desire to get a good education and career may cause delayed marriage, but they further explained that being highly educated or holding high-ranking jobs was not an excuse for them to reject the importance of marriage. Mazniah (aged 24; single female) explained: *'Although my career and my work requirements need me to pursue my studies until PhD level, I still want to marry.'* Shakila (aged 40; married female) said: *'Having a good job and a good educational background was not a barrier for me to marry.'* Yusrina (aged 37; married) explained that she accepted herself as a married woman because she understood that marriage, family formation, being a knowledgeable person and being a career woman are all greatly encouraged by Islam in daily life, and she said: *'Why should I think I don't have to marry although I have a good qualification? Work and marriage are two things that Islam asks its believers to do.'* They also agreed that the opportunities they received in education and employment were amongst the factors that led them to marry at a later age. For example, Yusrina realised that her ability to achieve higher educational qualifications, which then enabled her to acquire well-paying jobs before marriage, had led her to marry at the age of 27. She recalled:

*I preferred to finish my studies, get a good job before I thought of getting married at that time. I don't think my age at that time was too late for girls to get married because most of my female friends were also getting married after they finished their studies. (Yusrina, aged 37; married)*

For these reasons, the respondents have given positive responses pertaining to marriage and family, and therefore their answers confirm that all of them understand and respect the value of family, and believe that it should be formed through the relationships between men and women by holy matrimony<sup>1</sup> [15-19]. They still regard marriage and family as

important and they desire to implement it in their lives. For instance, Mazniah (aged 24; single female) said, *'I think every Malay Muslim woman intends to get married because they can form their own family and have their own children and so do I [laughs].'* Amalina (aged 25; single female) who also shared the same ideology said, *'I don't know how to say it [laughs] but I would love to be a married person and have children one day.'* Furthermore, I shall discuss three factors that I found have influenced their positive answers towards marriage and family namely: religion, culture and socioeconomic background psychological and emotional needs

#### *Religious factor*

The study has found that religious and cultural factors were the most consistent answers given by the respondents associated with the reason why they considered marriage and family was still important in their lives. For instance, Halimah explained that her positive perception of marriage and family was because of the prohibitions on living together and sex prior to marriage by the Islamic religion and the Malay adat. She added that if any Malay Muslims practise cohabitation or sexual activities before marriage, they are deemed to have gone against Malay social norms and Islamic teachings. She highlighted her understanding of *bersekedudukan* (cohabitation) and *zina* (fornication) as two practices that are prohibited to Malay Muslim society. Halimah (aged 35; married female) said: *'bersekedudukan' and 'zina' are sins, and these acts are not allowed in my society.'* For this reason, she wanted to marry in order to form a family. Halimah further emphasised that marriage is not only a solemn and sacred social contract between a man and a woman to live as husband and wife but it is also designed consummate the union between them. Halimah recalled her decision to marry by saying:

*I think marriage is a sacred relationship between a man and a woman. I know this is noted in Islamic teachings and in Malay culture. I believe that marriage is still important in my society in order to form a family. I made my decision to marry at that time because I wanted to follow what has been taught and practised by my religion and my culture. (Halimah, aged 35; married female)*

Evidently, this situation confirmed that the key criterion in Malay Muslim family formation is marriage. In Malay society, the meaning of marriage and the family are influenced by Islam. It is clearly accepted that family is the basic unit in the Malay social system, which has to be formed through a marriage between a man and a woman, where in general, usually the man is a *teruna* (youth) and the woman is an *anak*

<sup>1</sup> The importance of marriage and family is stated in the *Quran*: 'And Allah has made for you mates (and companions) of your own nature, and made for

you, out of them, sons and daughters and grand children, and provide for you sustenance of the best: will they then believe in vain things, and be ungrateful of Allah's favours' (*Surah al-Nahl* (Chapter Bees): 72).

*dara* (virgin)<sup>2</sup> [17]. As Muslims, marriage plays a crucial role in validating a family and the relationship between husband and wife because no family can be formed without marriage [18], therefore other forms of family, such as cohabiting families and homosexual families cannot be accepted by Malay society [15-19]. It is important to say that the idea of marriage and forming a family was widely accepted in Malay Muslim society in Malaysia, where virtually all Malay Muslims who live with their partners are in the formal and legal marriages. It is reasonable to conclude that my respondents' situations may differ from some societies, particularly in western countries where the idea of cohabitation as an alternative way to form a family is accepted [7].

Five of the respondents claimed that their time of marriage was very much influenced by the Islamic religion. Interestingly, they believed in that *jodoh* (a soul-mate who will be sent by Allah S.W.T. and the day of marriage will come at the perfect time, which only Allah S.W.T. knows). In regards to *jodoh*, my respondents mentioned that they need to make an effort to find a marriage partner, although the notion of *jodoh* was set by Allah S.W.T. They further elaborated that, before leaving this matter to Allah S.W.T., they need to make '*usaha*' (an effort), '*doa*' (a prayer) and '*tawakkal*' (an engagement); these terms express phrase explains that Muslims believe that whatever happens in their lives, they hope Allah S.W.T will grant their wishes. For instance, Bahijah and Arena said:

*I think 'jodoh saya' has not come yet, that is why I am still single. As a Muslim I believe that 'jodoh saya adalah di tangan' Tuhan (my soul-mate is in the hands of Allah S.W.T.). However, I still need to look for 'my jodoh' and not only just sit down for the 'jodoh' to come [laughs]. (Bahijah, aged 29; single female)*

*Allah S.W.T has chosen my soul-mate, who is my husband now. I believe Allah S.W.T has set my marriage at that time. Alhamdulillah (All Praise to Allah), I married when I was doing my master's degree. (Arena, aged 35; married)*

Halimah (aged 35; married) also said: '*I know my 'jodoh' is 'qadak' and 'qadar' [literally translated as divine decree] from Allah S.W.T. I married because 'jodoh saya sudah sampai' [literally translated as my soul-mate has arrived].'* Halimah's answer is related to the fate that Allah S.W.T determines for all Muslims as stated in 'The Six Pillars of Faith'. Since all Muslims must believe in these six pillars, therefore, my respondents agreed that their age at marriage could not be predicted.

<sup>2</sup> This explains that both the man and the woman have to maintain their virginity until marriage, particularly during their first marriage, and this indicates that pre-marital sex is forbidden in Islam. In Malay Muslim society, all individuals are constantly reminded not to do it as it is considered a sin.

The respondents' arguments regarding *jodoh* have only been supported by a study conducted by Ibrahim and Hassan [20] on never-married Malay Muslim women in Malaysia, which found that the word *jodoh* is often used by Malay Muslim people when they talk about marriage. Their respondents commonly used the word *jodoh* in explaining their reasons for late marriage and being single. Therefore, none of them claimed that being unmarried was fully 'a personal choice as they believed *jodoh* is closely related to fate granted by God'[20], which is similar to the reasons given by my respondents.

#### *Cultural factor*

One of the respondents expressed her anxiety and fear about late marriage and being *anak dara tua*<sup>3</sup> (an old virgin girl) when she recalled her age at the time she got married. This label was given by Malay society to the women were not married or their ages at marriage to be too late as they were within the accepted range of ages in Malaysia.<sup>4</sup>This problem is also faced by single women in other countries, who will also be labelled, for example, as *shengnu*<sup>5</sup> in China and *shen lu*<sup>6</sup> in Taiwan (both literally translate as 'leftover women'). Mashitah decided to marry after she had completed her master's degree. She did not want to postpone the wedding because she was 30 by that time. As she felt that in her thirties was late for marriage, she went ahead and tied the knot:

*When I met my husband again after we finished our studies at secondary school, I believed that we were meant to be together. So, we decided to get married when I finished my master's degree. I was 30 and I don't want to be called 'anak dara tua.'* (Mashitah, aged 37; married)

Another example, Shakila (aged 40; married) explained that her late father only gave his permission for his daughters' marriages after they had finished their bachelor's degree. However, she further explained that he had also told them to marry first, if they had plans to pursue their studies at master's or PhD level. Despite her late father never gave any reason why he made that decision, Shakila assumed that he might have felt worried that there would be no men who would be interested in marrying his well-educated daughters, which was also a normative assumption among her hometown community

<sup>3</sup> This refers to a female bachelor who is not married at a late age.

<sup>4</sup> This was my respondents' assumption through their observations of the reality of what happens today in Malay society in relation to the age of first marriage. They also mentioned that normally they saw that men and women will marry when they are 24 or above. These answers were given when I asked further about what they meant by their age not being too late for marriage.

<sup>5</sup> This refers to single Chinese women over 28 years old. See China Love Report: 'Leftover women' look for younger men. Available at <<http://travel.cnn.com/shanghai/none/china-love-report-989133>> [Accessed 7 June 2012].

<sup>6</sup> See Legislator triggers argument over 'leftover women'. Available at <<http://www.taiwaninsights.com/2012/04/04/legislator-triggers-argument-over-leftover-women/>> [Accessed 7 June 2012].

at that time. Shakila said that this was also a strong reason influencing her age at marriage and her decision to marry.

#### *Psychological and emotional needs*

Two of the respondents illustrate their positive views on marriage and family as fulfilling their psychological and emotional needs. Irdiena and Maria mentioned three important issues, which I have categorised as: 'to have a life partner who can give support', 'being afraid of living alone when getting older' and 'a feeling of security when married' as benefits of being married. Of these, the fear of being and living alone appeared to be the main concern. They emphasised that family relationships involve many individuals because each and every member of the family needs mutual assistance and support from the others. Thus, it can be concluded that both of these respondents are harbouring hopes that their family will meet their material, personal and spiritual needs. Moreover, it was interesting that they also referred to the role of religion as being important in supporting their reasoning about the importance of family as a place to gain security and love. This is similar to the thoughts of Daud [15], who states that Islam describes the family as a platform which ensures peace, relationships, care, a loving environment, harmony and stability as well as giving protection from hazards and problems.<sup>7</sup> As Irdiena and Maria explained:

*For me, marriage is necessary because people need a family to support them with compassion, as mentioned in Islam, and this is important among family members. The support can be moral and physical. For example, a husband will support his wife or his children and vice versa. In fact, I believe that I need a family, even though I feel OK as a single person. If I don't have a family and children, nobody will take care of me when I get older. My life would be difficult if I lived alone without having any family members around me in the future. (Irdiena, aged 27; single female)*

*Yeah, I want to have a soul-mate to accompany me when I become older. I also feel that my life will be more secure if I get married and have a family. I think this is why my religion encourages believers to marry so that we can share love and care in appropriate ways. (Maria, aged 27; married)*

With their positive answers about being married women, this has also influenced the age of first marriage among my respondents. There were different age trends at first marriage

before and after Independence in Malay society. During the 1950s, many less educated rural Malay women between the ages of 15 and 19 in Peninsular Malaysia [21-23]. These women were not allowed to have as much social freedom as men and they were homebound and were unable to acquire a higher level of education because of strong rural traditions and customary influences [22]. However, the age at first marriage has been changing since 1957, when Malay women started to benefit because of education and employment as well as more of them migrating to urban areas, which was a result of modernisation and urbanisation. Since that year, marriage decisions among Malay women have changed [21-23]. According to the latest statistics in 2010, the percentage of the Malaysian population aged 15 and over who had never been married was 35.1% while 59.6% were married. In addition, mean age at first marriage for men was 28.0, while that for women was 25.7[24]. With more than 50% of men and women being married, these statistics show that marriage is still a normative practice in Malaysia. In my study, as shown in Table 1, all the married female respondents got married when they were between 22 and 30, while the ages of my single respondents were between 24 and 29 years old and some of them are also expecting to marry within the same age range as the married respondents. I would say that the ages of first marriage among my respondents were still within the age of marriage for female according to statistical Malaysia.

TABLE I  
AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE<sup>8</sup>

Pseudonym	Relationship status	Length of marriage	Women's age (now)	Women's age at marriage
Emilia	Married	7 years	31	24
Basariah	Married	4 years	32	28
Rashidah	Married	12 years	37	25
Halimah	Married	13 years	35	22
Arena	Married	10 years	35	25
Mashitah	Married	7 years	37	30
Yusrina	Married	10 years	37	27
Umaira	Married	7 years	31	24
Maria	Married	6 months	27	27
Shakila	Married	15 years	40	25
Amalina	Single		25	
Bahijjah	Single		29	
Irdina	Engaged		27	
Naimah	Single		26	
Mazniah	Single		24	

<sup>7</sup> Daud's statement was based on the *Quran, Surah Al-Rum* (Chapter The Roman Empire: 21) which says: 'And among his signs is this: He created for you spouses from yourselves that you might find rest in them, and He ordained between you and mercy,' and also The Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. said: 'The best among you are those who are best to their families and I am the best of you to my family.' He once exclaimed: 'It is only the evil one who abuses those (women) and the honoured one is he who honours them.'

<sup>8</sup> The age for all married respondents in this study was the age of their first marriages. All the marriages in my study were my respondents' first marriages. None of the single respondents have ever been married. Therefore, their age now will indicate their age at first marriage if they were getting married.

## IV. SUMMARY

It is clear that marriage and forming a family were still considered as an important centre for my respondents. The Islamic religion and the Malay *adat*, cultural factor, as well as psychological and emotional needs were all reflected in their decisions to marry and form a family life by their mid-twenties to thirties. It is apparent that they accepted the effects of modernity and at the same time they respected the religious and cultural aspects of their society in influencing their positive views on the importance of marriage and family formation in their lives. Overall, I found that all of them saw themselves as modern, educated and professional women who live in urban areas and wanted to success in their family life and their careers.

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