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SINGLEHOOD PHENOMENON: UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL SARAWAK MALAY WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper is aimed to highlight the phenomenon of single professional Malay women in Sarawak. Changes in marital trends and family life in Malaysia and other South East Asian countries do not mirror those that have occurred in the west. Much of the research on single women in the west has only looked at singles based on their 'civil status' and failed to distinguish between single women who have never married and women who are divorced, widowed, separated or cohabitating. One of the most common explanations for being single is the concept of *Jodoh* and *Qada* and *Qadar*, it brings the same meaning to some of the metaphorical statements such as: "Things happened for reasons", "Blessing in disguise", "Wisdom behind it", "*kun faya kun*" (what will be will be). The first section of this paper will review literatures on the concept of singlehood among Malays including the western and eastern concept of womanhood. This section will elaborate on some common reasons for not marrying and being single. The second part of this article focuses on the reflections of why singleness matter among Malays. The intent is to comprehend some explanations based on the experience to the question: "why are they not married?" and set out to understand "what went wrong?" This paper thus highlights the phenomenon of not married or singlehood among Sarawak Malay in the shifting, developing and post-colonial Sarawak and Malaysian society.

Keywords: Singlehood, Malay women, marriage, gender, culture

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This conceptual paper is aimed to highlight the phenomenon of single professional Malay women in Sarawak. Changes in marital trends and family life in Malaysia and other South East Asian countries do not mirror those that have occurred in the west. Much of the research on single women in the west has only looked at singles based on their 'civil status' and failed to distinguish between single women who have never married and women who are divorced, widowed, separated or cohabitating. One of the most common explanations for being single is the concept of *Jodoh* and *Qada* and *Qadar*; it brings the same meaning to some of the metaphorical statements such as: "Things happened for reasons", "Blessing in disguise", "Wisdom behind it", "*kun faya kun*" (what will be will be). The first section of this paper will review literatures on the concept of singlehood among Malays including the western and eastern concept of womanhood. This section will elaborate on some common reasons for not marrying and being single. The second part of this article focuses on the reflections of why singleness matter among Malays. The intent is to comprehend some explanations based on the experience to the question: "why are they not married?" and set out to understand "what went wrong?" This paper thus highlights the phenomenon of not married or singlehood among Sarawak Malay in the shifting, developing and post-colonial Sarawak and Malaysian society.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of *andartu* or *andalusia* or *lalo* in Sarawak local dialect – all meaning spinsterhood – is increasingly reported in contemporary Malaysian media, clearly illustrating the changing patterns of modern lifestyles and attitudes towards marriage. In Malaysia, marriage patterns have changed dramatically and an increasing number of people have remained unmarried. The mean age of a first marriage among Malaysian women increased from 22 years in 1970 to 25 years in 2000 (Tey, 2007). The proportion of women who

have not married among those aged 30-34 years increased from 6 per cent in 1990 to 9.7 per cent in 2000.

In reality, little girls are raised on fairy tales where the princess and frog live happily ever after and Cinderella met the prince of her dreams and lived happily ever after. As a reflection of social and cultural norms and attitudes, many portrayals of single woman in television show heterosexual woman to meet a man, fall in love, marry the man of her dreams, and live happily ever after. Popular culture in the early twenty-first century, exemplified in the recent spate of reality television shows in Malaysia (for example, *Program Mencari Menantu* – Looking for daughter-in-law, *Gadis Melayu* – Malay ladies, *Mencari cinta* – Looking for love, *Mencari pasangan* – Looking for soul mate) which portray young adults' public pursuit of spouses, underscores the pervasiveness of the cultural message that marriage is still a sought-after irreplaceable goal for healthy heterosexual Malay women. It is observed that the cultural consensus about gender and marriage has changed in recent years and that current cohorts of young Malay women are redefining their identity and cultural rules about being married in Malay culture.

Review of being single in Malay culture

The most prominent concept concerning women in Malay families is based on the sayings *syurga di bawah telapak kaki ibu* (literally translated as heaven lies under a mother's feet) and *sebijak mana pun perempuan itu, tempatnya tetap di dapur* (literally translated as regardless of how smart a woman is, her rightful place remains the kitchen). These are only two examples that illustrate the importance of mother's role and Malay's women domestic roles in the broader Malay society. The present images of Malay women are portrayed as the avatar of family honour, as wives and as mothers. Alternative images of women are rarely portrayed.

In the twenty-first century, however, such depictions have become obsolete as individuals' shifting attitudes toward gender roles, independence, and self-fulfillment have led to greater acceptance and enthusiasm for singlehood (Drummond, Kaufman, Moffett, Savaiano & Sieger, 2000). The functional bases for traditional marriage also have eroded over the past four decades (Baumbusch, 2004). For instance, the increased educational and career attainments of Malay women have had a substantial impact on the choices they make regarding marriage and parenthood. In particular, the generation

of Malay women after the National Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1971, have changed in their life roles and life decision making pertaining to marriage and motherhood. Malay women's educational attainment, labour force participation, and earnings relative to men have increased steadily over the past fifty years (Omar & Hamzah, 2003). The NEP has resulted in rising literacy rates and highly educated women. Consequently, people's mind set and the stereotypes is slowly disintegrating and the perspectives between generations of Malay women on this important topic of marriage may differ greatly.

Although this paper has no intention to look at the different cohorts of single Malay women, it is important to highlight how time may have changed the experience of single women. For example, in the western context, increasing acceptance of non-traditional family forms, such as cohabitation, and changing attitudes toward the acceptability of non-marital sex, have created a context in which young women and men today may receive many of the benefits of marriage without actually entering a legal union (Thornton, Axinn & Hill, 1992). Cultural and normative shifts in the value of marriage *vis-a-vis* other forms of social relationships, such as cohabitation, friendship, and gay relationships, have occurred in the last four decades (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). However, in Islam, pre-marital sex is *haram* (prohibited), homosexuality is condemned, and cohabitation is illegal. Under *syariah* (Islamic) law, a person can be caught and, if found guilty, punished for cohabiting or committing adultery. This law has never been changed, *khalwat* (cohabitation) is still an issue from far back in history until today, a Malay woman is legally prohibited to indulge in any of the acts above. Not least for legislative reason, cohabitation has never become an accepted life course stage between dating and marriage, as in many western countries where it provides many of the same emotional and sexual rewards as legal marriage. Thus for single Malay Muslim women in Sarawak, they are not only influenced by Malay mainstream culture, but also by the values and ideas shared among members of their Islamic religion. Single Malay Muslim women use their faith and religion as a referent about marriage and singlehood and such positions have a significant impact on their attitudes and beliefs (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009).

As most research into singlehood has emanated from developed western countries such as the USA, the UK and Canada, it is not surprising that the literature in the field is dominated by western perspectives. Thus the question arises as to whether western assumptions and findings hold true in non-