

## **“I am Not Alone”: Managing Singleness - Exploring Single Malay Muslim Women’s Voices in Malaysia**

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### ***Abstract***

*In a nation such as Malaysia where religion and culture/tradition dominate the landscape, being a “single” woman is indeed a very challenging endeavour. Religion encourages marriage and culture/tradition enforces it. Singles are normally stereotyped and discriminated while married women are well-accepted. Hence, how does one manage to stay single without the fear of being marginalized or discriminated in such a gruelling environment? How does one single woman negotiate and manage her freedom while maintaining her equilibrium in such demanding society? Most importantly, what and how do they feel about being single, how do they position themselves as single women in the context of modern Malaysian society that holds strongly to culture/tradition and religion, and how do they define themselves within such society. This article examines self-perceptions of Malaysian Muslim Malay women on how they construct their self-concept and identity, how they speak about single as an ideological field and to understand their situation of singleness.*

### **Introduction**

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multi-religious country with a population of 28.3 million people (as of December, 2010). In a nation such as Malaysia where religion and culture/tradition dominate the landscape, being a “single” woman is indeed a very challenging endeavour. Religion encourages marriage and culture/tradition enforces it. Singles are normally stereotyped and discriminated while married women are considered as taking just the right step. Hence, how does one manage to stay single without the fear of being marginalised or discriminated in such a gruelling environment? How does one single woman negotiate and manage her freedom while maintaining her equilibrium in such a demanding society? Most importantly, what and how do they feel about being single, how do they position themselves as single women in the context of modern Malaysian society that holds strongly to culture/tradition and religion, and how do they define themselves within such a society. This article examines self-perceptions of Malaysian Malay Muslim women on how they construct their self-concept and identity, how they speak about single as an ideological field and to understand their situation of singleness.

As a Malay Muslim woman, there are certain religious and cultural/traditional expectations that are expected to be complied to and marriage is one of those. A study conducted by a group of local researchers revealed that after 50 years of Independence, Malay women still closely adhere to their traditional cultural values where they are

expected to be strong as a mother while remaining effeminate and subservient as a wife. This expectation is stronger among rural as opposed to urban women.

The negative image of 'being single' for women in an Asian society such as Malaysia is slowly transforming. However, discussion about singlehood is still considered as 'taboo' despite the fact that the number of single Malay Muslim Malaysian women did increase significantly over the years. According to Williams et al. (2006), in many parts of the world, there have been important changes in marriage behaviour, as entry into marriage is being delayed and increasing proportions will never marry. Increasing delay and foregone marriage among other things reflect or contribute to increasing individualism and evolving gender roles and statuses. These references and others in the succeeding sections below would be linked together to show a certain pattern of behavior among Muslim Malay Malaysian women.

In the context of this article, single women refer to those who never married and who have passed the conventional age of marriage as generally expected by the Malaysian tradition/culture. This article adopts Byrne's (2000) four definitional criteria of singleness to define singleness which are never-married, over 30 of age, not cohabiting and childless. The age of 30 seems a turning point as women are reminded of their failure to meet conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood (Adams, 1976; Burney, 1979; Peterson, 1981; Stein, 1981 in Byrne 2000) The cut off age of 30 as marriageable age is also because at this age most women are married and those who chose to remain single are highly likely to stay single due to their economic independence. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) made a commonplace observation that whereas married women or women in long-term partnership with men are rarely asked to explain themselves, single women do seem to have to engage in a lot of explaining. Women, in married relationships do not tend to be asked (in a concerned tone of voice) for example, "how did you end up married?" Apology and confessions are not the dominant discursive genres for these accounts. The single woman, in contrast, is expected to have an explanation for her 'condition', preferably a story of 'circumstances' and 'missed opportunities' or one that blames herself for being "unable to hold on to her man". And this paper operates from the same premise. As Jones (2004) stated:

*The high proportions still unmarried in their 30s and 40s raises issues about many aspects of their lives; their patterns of residence, self-image, views about the primacy of marriage and patterns of intimate relationships - within the family, with close friends of both sexes, as well as those involving sexual expression. Sadly, we know little about any of these matters.*

Hence the main objective of this paper is to investigate and understand how one feels and perceives oneself as a single woman living in a Muslim Malay community in terms of the situation of singleness, singles as an ideological field and to understand how single women construct their self-concept and identity within such a community.

## **Malaysian Women, Religion and Culture**

The different religions and cultures of Malaysia have many positive aspects in women's lives. However, it is also the case that women are discriminated against by their religions and cultures, which perpetuate stereotyped gender roles and protectionist and patriarchal attitudes towards women.

Stereotyped gender roles and patriarchal attitudes are obvious in religion and culture. And these obvious discriminatory acts are widely reflected within the society's tradition and culture, at work place, in school and especially in laws. Media's role in perpetuating the stereotypical images of women can be best described as shallow and narrow. On films, drama and soap operas, the press and broadcast media, women's activities and interest typically go no further than the confines of home and family.

Studies conducted by local researchers such as by Mustafa Kamal Anuar and Wang Lay Kim (1991, 1994, 1996, 2000) substantiated that women in locally produced dramas are depicted as weak or dependent on male characters. The similar pattern can be seen in the news - women are almost invisible, secondary or subordinate. They are dependent on the male characters, reflecting prevailing dynamics of spousal relations. Meanwhile studies done by Azman Azwan Azmawati & Juliana Abd Wahan (2005) and Kiranjit Kaur (2004) demonstrated the reinforcement of stereotypical and traditional women's roles in locally produced women programmes. The local media content is influenced by what society perceives to be naturally accepted ways of viewing and defining reality of women.

This is also demonstrated in the laws that consistently discriminate women. Overlapping between Syariah Laws and Civil Laws causes difficulties in the working of law and in the formulation or amendments of laws. One example is the amendment to the Guardianship Act to grant non-Muslim women equal rights to guardianship. This right was not extended to Muslim women because Muslim women are under the jurisdiction of Syariah Law. Women and men are not equal before the law nor do the sexes have equal protection of law. Women before the law continue to encounter sexual discrimination, in the formulation of laws, in lack of laws to protect women against discrimination and in the interpretation and enforcement of laws especially in the Syariah Laws. (Women's Equality in Malaysia: Status Report, 2001).

The latest case in point is the proposed amendments to the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984. The law widens the grounds for allowing husbands to contract polygamy, giving a husband a claim in the "community property" which was originally legislated to protect women from poverty in the case of divorce or death of a husband and enabling a polygamous husband to avoid providing maintenance to a wife by making her give up either her rights to maintenance or to the "community property". Many other laws are also not satisfactory enough to protect women against gender discrimination especially those that fall within the Syariah Laws jurisdiction.

One could argue that the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia in part contributes to the informed choice of many Muslim women to wear the hijab or head gear. Muslim women generally wear tudung (hijab/scarves/head gear) over their heads. The tudung is a symbol of a Muslim woman. This is such **because** it represents the modesty of a woman, as described by religion. However, those who opted for not covering their head are allowed to do so without any consequences.

According to Maznah (2001), as elsewhere, visible indicators such as the phenomenon of veiling and the return to more modest forms of dress among Muslim women have actually led to the mistaken notion that women have retrogressed along the spectrum of modernity and liberalism. In actual fact, many Muslim women who seemingly partake in such outward acts of “de-modernising” themselves do not translate such choices into their withdrawal from public life. The adoption of veiling during the fervour of Islamisation as an alternative dress form, ironically led to a more potent sense of presence and visibility for women in society. However Maznah emphasised that this “visibility” is still of the measured and contained variety. Women are conscious that there are boundaries and that the keepers of these perimeters would not tolerate any transgression.

### **The Discourse of Singleness**

According to Gordan (2002), defining ‘single women’ is increasingly becoming difficult as statistics based on marital status are usually compiled on the basis of the categories ‘single’, ‘married’, ‘divorced’ and ‘widowed’. In demographic research however, the category of ‘never-married’ is used. Singles include, for example women who are divorced. Gordan (2002) when conducting her study on single women, adopted Stein’s (1981) typology of singles on the basis of elements of permanence and choice; **voluntary temporary** singles, **voluntary stable** singles, **involuntary temporary** singles and **involuntary stable** singles. Her main concern was to **distinguish between voluntary temporary** singles still hoping to form partnerships and those who had chosen to be single and planned to remain so.

Meanwhile Byrne (2003) claimed that many studies of single women, such as by Blanchard, 1985; Bonds-White, 1987; Duggan, 1993 and Hartz-Karp, 1981, presented singleness as a deviant identity to marriage while demonstrating that women can be satisfied with the single life-style. Byrne’s study was geared towards understanding and conceptualising single women’s self-identity and social-identity. She was keen to study the human capacity of choice and agency, and the role of self-identity in facilitating this capacity. Her main question was on “who am I and where do I fit?” Consequently, the theoretical work of Mead (1934), Giddens (1991), Taylor (1985) and Foucault (1988a, 1988b) in particular guided the constituent elements of the model of identity presented by her.

Byrne’s research focused on the consequences of dominant social identities for the composition of self-identities and she further argued that self-identity is consequential for effecting transformation in social identities.



The research conducted for this study adopted the Feminist Discursive Analysis of Singleness as used by Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) in their own study. Their theoretical commitments that guided their empirical research are also adopted by this study. According to them, these commitments consisted of five linked claims about 'singleness' and followed variants of discursive psychology which worked across both conversation analysis and post-structuralist discourse theories.

Firstly, they suggested that single state is best viewed as socially constructed; secondly, singleness is a social category; thirdly, singleness should be studied not just as a socially constructed and as a social category but also as a discourse; followed by singleness needs to be studied as a set of personal narratives and subject positions and lastly; singleness should also be political.

According to them, socially constructed refers to how singleness has been understood historically as well as the changing patterns of social arrangements and social practices for regulating relationships. Singleness is a social category that refers to how category is constituted at different historical moments and in different interactional contexts. The focus is on 'how' the social category of singleness is constructed rather than 'who' really is a member.

Their third broad premise on singleness as a discourse relates to the ideological field as the shifting patterns and meanings which construct singleness in relation to power.

The fourth proposal that requires singleness to be studied as a set of personal narratives and subject positions is about studying and understanding single women's daily accounts, as identity is a negotiated performance. Finally, singleness is about politics refers to singleness as an arena in which feminists need to develop further strategies of resistance and a collective voice which might help women to position themselves in much more enabling ways. These premises are adopted in developing the themes and questions targeted for the respondents.

### **Women and Singlehood in Malaysia**

Malaysia has advanced remarkably in terms of socio-economic development and the Malaysian women in general too have made significant progress in many realms of life. The total number of women in the labour force has increased from 37.2% in 1970 to 42.2% in 1980, 47.8% in 1991, 46.7 in 2000 and 46.4% in 2009 (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2010). The policies, strategies and programmes for the progression of women are included in the socio-economic development plans for the country. Inspired by the declaration of the Women's Decade from 1975 to 1985 by the United Nations, the Malaysian government has made a pledge to intensify the participation of women in the development of the country. Consequently, more women are now in the job market. The increase in the number of employed women indicates that they have advanced significantly over the years.

Single Malay Muslim women, while increasing in number, are an understudied group. Within the academic setting, a debate on singlehood in Malaysia is not a popular topic and hence, discourses on such issue are difficult to come by and not much substantial survey research can be found. Relevant studies are mainly confined to issues on population research. However, it is indeed a very popular topic within the popular mass media and consequently has become a major issue for the popular women magazines and newspapers in general. Being single after the prescribed marriageable age becomes such a popular topic because 'single' suddenly becomes a 'problem' for a tradition that gives importance to marriage and especially in a country whereby Islam is the official religion.

Jones (2004) states that until about three decades ago, the Muslim Malay populations in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Southern Thailand were normally married by the age of 18. Nevertheless, the trend changes over the years and there seems to be a general pattern of marriage delay in these nations. In Malaysia, between 1970 and 2000, the mean age at first marriage increased for women. In 1970, the mean age was 22.1, 23.5 (1980), 24.7 (1991) to 25.1 (2000) (Rabeiyah Mat & Roszaini Omar, Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2002).

In the case of Malaysian Muslims Malay, the total percentage of never-married women over the age of 30 was 3.1% in 1960, 7% in 1970, 15.6% in 1980, 22.4% in 1990 and increases to 23.3% in year 2000 (Jones, 2003).

A study by Jones (1981) demonstrates that delay in marriage is a manifestation of social and economic changes experienced by the Malays. The major determining factor has been the change in educational policies which have resulted in higher proportions of Malay women entering the tertiary levels. Another crucial factor which contributed to the delay in marriage is the migration of Malay women to the cities to participate in the job market due to the lucrative economic stability of Malaysia.

As Jones (2004) further reiterated, or more importantly, education and participation in the job market liberated women further in that they 'opened young women's eyes to new understanding of society and their place in it.' Education has given woman access to jobs outside the home and consequently to economic independence.

According to Williams (2006) perhaps the most prominent study in recent years has focused on women's economic independence. Once women gain other avenues to economic advancement, often through education and employment options, early (or any) marriage should become less necessary as women no longer need to depend on male earnings for survival. Women of higher socioeconomic status can afford a longer search for an appropriate spouse.

### **Self-Concept and Identity: I am A Single Woman!**

How does one single Malaysian Malay Muslim woman feel about being single in this community? Interviews were conducted to answer the question. The single

women ranged in age from those in the early 30s to the late 60s. All were heterosexual Malaysian citizens. All had graduated from university and had obtained graduate degrees. Compared to the general population of single women, the respondents were mainly highly educated professionals in full-time employment, earning higher incomes with the exception of one who is pursuing her post-graduate programme but was once a professional.

**Table 1: Demographic Background of Participants**

Pseudon	Age	Relationship Status	Occupation	Income per month
Intan	48	Single	Manager	RM7k
Aishah	39	Single	Lawyer	RM5k
Melissa	42	Single	Manager	RM5k
Karyna	50	Single	Associate Professor	RM9k
Sofeya	38	Single	Lecturer	RM4.5k
Aryna	37	Single	PhD candidate	RM2k
Elyssa	34	Single	Research Officer	RM2k
Azlyza	60	Single	Lecturer	RM5k
		Single		RM3.5k

Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the respondents. The age range of respondents is between 34 to 60 in order to reflect the differences in age group so as to gauge the different perspectives. This is also to indicate the cut off age of marriage as proposed by Adams (1976) of 30 years. In terms of representativeness of the sample with respect to education of the Malay women, the sample shows that all of them have at least a basic degree. With respect to place of residence, all of them are from urban areas, namely Kuala Lumpur and Penang. In terms of monthly income, all of them are earning at least RM2,000 a month.

Respondents were also asked about their highest level of education, place of residence and their state of singleness by choice or otherwise. A semi-structured, face-to-face and in-depth interviews were conducted with nine single women on their views of being single in a Muslim-majority country and Malay community. Interviews were conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. The interviews lasted approximately between half an-hour and an hour. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, removing their real names so as to protect their privacy, as promised to them.

Women were recruited through a snowball technique through contacting various people and some were recommended to researcher. According to Maeda (2008), obtaining a sample on such private topic (as well as cultural unfamiliarity of becoming a research participant) without any personal connection or social obligation (e.g. national census) is likely to be quite difficult. In social science research, snowball sampling is a technique for developing a research sample whereby existing study subjects recruit

future subjects from among their acquaintances. Thus the sample group appears to grow like a rolling snowball and as the sample builds up, enough data is gathered to be useful for research.

Demographic information was gathered during the interview session. Respondents were given a set of written questions before the interview began to familiarise them with the questions. They went through the questions within a few minutes before the interview began.

The questions were divided into six main themes: living arrangement, religiosity, satisfaction with life, social concept and self-identity, empowerment and dealing with singleness issues.

### **Reasons Why Women Do Not Marry**

In essence, most of the women interviewed did not rule out the factor of being married in the future. All of the women interviewed claimed that their singleness status has never been an issue in themselves. Being single is associated with independence and all of them adopted the idea very well.

And being single to most of them, is about choices - they either make the conscious choice to stay single until they meet the right person or they would like to remain single for the rest of their living. And to them, being single equates to freedom.

### **Living Arrangement**

Under this theme, respondents were asked about their living conditions such as where they live, whether they live alone or with someone including the reason being, 'if they live with others whom would that be, the reason for not living alone, if they are living with family why is it so, given a choice would they rather live alone and do they think that it is most appropriate for a single Muslim daughter to be living with the parents.

These questions are expected to generate some data on how single Malaysian Malay women perceive and rate the importance of living arrangement in their daily lives.

Most of the respondents who live with their family do so for practical reasons as they live in the same state and hence, it is only logical for them to be living with their families.

Melissa said:

*I would like to live alone because that means freedom. When you are still living at your parents' house, you are considered as still "under age" and have to abide by their laws. I still have a mother and she needs someone to talk to so that would be me because I am still single.*



And when asked whether it is most appropriate for a single daughter to live with the parents, all of the respondents feel that it is appropriate for any child to do that regardless of status. It is more of a personal choice and not due to tradition or culture or one's marital status.

Said Intan:

*It is more of a sense of responsibility. My parents are old and I am the eldest in the family. I feel responsible to take care of them. I am doing it not because I am single and hence I have more time for them but I am doing it because I want to, as a responsible child.*

According to Azlyza:

*Islam never objects to the idea of single Muslim woman living alone, so there is no issue about it. I live alone because I want to.*

In essence, all of the respondents feel that living with their parents is not about fulfilling the cultural or religion's expectations but because they personally feel strongly about taking care of their aged parents. Their sense of responsibility is the guiding factor. However, if given a choice, they would not mind and prefer to be living alone.

## **Religiosity**

This part assesses the respondents' perspectives on religion as single women in an Islamic state that encourages marriage. Respondents were asked about their views on religion; whether they consider themselves religious; they see Islam as advocating marriage; how do they feel as Muslim women living in a Muslim society and not married, are they not performing their duty as a Muslim woman by being single; does it bother them being single and living within the Malay Muslim community; given a choice, would they prefer being married.

These questions are expected to generate some data on whether religion plays a role in their decision of being single and how do they view the role of religion in their respective lives.

When asked about how they view religion, the responses ranged from important to important.

Aishah stated that:

*Since we need a set of rules to live by, I live by my religion as the set of rules is already there. Perfect. At least I can align myself to move towards that.*

And Intan concurred with that notion:  
*It gives guidance on how one should lead one's life.*

All of the respondents feel that they are somewhat reasonably religious to religious when responding to the question of how religious they are. They would prefer not to be associated with extremely religious or very religious as they believe that they are performing their duties as a Muslim in their own way.

All of them viewed Islam as advocating marriage but Azlyza emphasized that:

*It is a 'sunnah' which is highly recommended as the Prophet strongly advocates it but in the end, God will decide for everything. If God wants it to happen, it will happen and I strongly adhere to that no matter how the society perceives it.*

However, none of them feels inadequate being single and living in a Muslim Malay community.

Nonetheless, Karyna has some reservation about this:  
*I admit that I do have my ups and downs as a single person living in the Muslim environment. But I think it is easier to be living in an urban environment compared to the rural areas. In the urban area, being single is a common phenomenon but having said that, I still do receive 'peculiar' looks from married people when they know that I am still single.*

More importantly, all of them feel that it is not against the religion to be single and it does not bother them to be living within the Muslim Malay community.

### **Satisfaction with life**

This part is to measure their general well-being. Questions that were posed to them mainly dealt with their state of happiness, people in their lives, relationships, friendships, contribution of family members and their state of being single.

These questions are expected to generate data on their well being - personally and their level of relationship satisfaction.

All of the respondents expressed their contentment with life and were happy with their current state of well-being.

Karyna said that she is genuinely happy with her life:  
*I am financially stable, spiritually stable, and emotionally stable so then, yes. I have a lot of potential; therefore I am so thankful for all those.*

And when asked which aspect of their lives that they are most satisfied with, three main elements were the main choices: freedom to make decisions, independence and their social and family networking.

Nur Iman is very happy and satisfied with her life because she is able to make her own decision and people in her life contribute enough to her general well-being, especially happiness.

When asked about whom they discuss personal issues most with, majority said that it was with their close friends. They are more comfortable talking about personal and private issues with close friends.

Elyssa feels that sharing with close friends makes her less vulnerable compared to sharing with her families. She does not talk about personal issues with her mother; for her, that is a very cultural thing. The family does not talk about personal and private issues since she was small. She talked and shared everything with her friends. That has always been that way.

### **Social concept and self-identity**

It is pertinent to understand how single women represent themselves to themselves and others; how they construct a sense of self and how they view themselves within the Malay Muslim community. Questions are on their individual values and preferences and specifying the uniqueness of the person such as who they are, how they define themselves and how they view themselves. These questions are expected to demonstrate their identity as single women. How do they view themselves within a Malay Muslim community? They all have the same take on this theme except for one respondent.

Karyna said that:

*I am very much aware that I am a single woman living in a community that is very much family-oriented. I also work in an environment that is very much family-oriented so I think I am very conscious of the fact that I am a single woman. And at times I am also reminded about that fact that I am single especially at weddings. Whenever I go to weddings alone, people will be looking at me differently because they are in*

*pairs. Actually, I am not a bit bothered but I am slightly conscious. And another thing about being single is that I get very conscious to mingle with married men especially when the wives are around because of the society's perception. Like I said before, I am not bothered but conscious of the environment.*

Generally, the rest of the respondents shared the same sentiment. They are aware of the constraints and limitations and expectations out of a Muslim Malay woman but they are not disturbed by that fact.

As Aishah emphasised:

*A woman is told that she must be married in order to be complete - that is the expectation within such society but as for me, I do not really care what people say about me. They can give me advice but it is up to me to take it up or otherwise.*

The rest of the respondents felt the same way. They do not feel pressured or even think about it.

Riza reiterated that:

*There is no big deal about being part of the Malay Muslim community. We do our stuff and keep things to ourselves. I am doing fine and happy with my life and I do not disturb others. I guess, that's how it works whichever kind of community that you live in.*

And Azlyza strongly believes that education makes it simpler for her to be single and survive within the Muslim Malay community.

*My education makes people respect me and leave me alone. Having my education makes people think highly of me thus the issue of being viewed differently never arises.*

## **Empowerment**

Empowerment relates to ideology and thus questions were on how they view empowerment and its relation to others in terms of self-autonomy and prioritising.

These questions are expected to enrich data on self-autonomy and individual agency.

All the women interviewed were strongly committed to living as independent women and perceived freedom as a very important value in being single. Believing that they are responsible for who they are, for the directions of their lives and for values and relationships choices, are crucial beliefs that they strongly adhere to. All the women interviewed consistently value their independence, their single life-styles and especially the importance of making autonomous choices.

All these quotes indicate that economic independence among single women frees them from the economic necessity of marriage and that is very liberating for them.



## Dealing with singleness issues

In order to examine whether singles experience discrimination or marginalisation, the first question asked was whether singleness poses a problem to them. Respondents were asked on whether they have to explain their state of singleness, followed by question on social stigmatisation such as stereotyping and then they were asked if they did experience marginalisation or discrimination. Respondents were also asked about how they deal with the fact that they are single.

In general, marriage is not about choice nor is it about necessity, according to most of the respondents. If the right partner cannot be found, non-marriage is a reasonable option. Women can now opt out of marriage for economic reasons. There is less economic need for women to get married today as women are less likely to depend on men for financial backing. Hence, all the respondents stated that being single is never an issue for them and it never did pose a problem for them. And most importantly, it is a matter of choice and thus, it is perfectly fine to choose being single.

All of them responded that they never suffer social stigmatisation and some of them attributed that to their level of education, which means by having certain level of education, people tend to leave them alone. Locality also assumes a crucial factor as urban societies are more liberal about one's marital status in comparison to the rural society.

For Karyna:

*Being marginalised as single women is not an issue as the issue is more on being marginalised as a woman - either the male voices get to make the decision or the elder siblings. The issue is not about married or single but more on the patriarchal nature of the society.*

However, when the respondent were asked if married women are taken more seriously compared to single women, she agreed with that notion as society places more emphasis on responsibilities and by virtue of being married, a woman is perceived to be capable of handling responsibilities.

Sofeya said that both single and married have equal responsibilities in a different way. Aryna believes that nowadays people are taking single women more seriously because they know that single women can do better compared to married women, unlike the last decade. Azlyza agrees and reiterates that this is generally and culturally true, but education makes the difference.

## Conclusion

Analysing single Malaysian Malay Muslim women narratives on how they feel about being single demonstrated that being single is about making autonomous choices. The analysis also demonstrated that all women interviewed value their freedom and being single is never an issue. In fact, according to them, single is a choice of a life-style that is equal to a married life-style, and chosen by married women. Hence, the issue of being single as a 'problematic' situation or being a 'deviant' in a traditional society never arises.

Most of the respondents interviewed did not rule out the prospect of getting married in the future if a suitable partner can be found. However, they are not consistently looking for one as they are generally satisfied with their current life.

Byrne (2003) in her study on women's self and social identities within the contemporary Irish society concluded that making autonomous choices, living as single women, are act of political and ideological resistance. Her study revealed the importance of achieving an autonomous selfidentity in order to resist and challenge dominant social identities.

This study demonstrated the same values. In essence, it can be concluded that the single Malaysian Malay Muslim women interviewed are very independent, value their freedom in making choices, generally satisfied and happy with their current life-styles and do not feel traumatised living within in the context of such cultural setting.

They decide what is best for them and do not feel the pressure to comply with the society's prescription. Through education, they achieve economic independence which in turn contributed to their self-identity/self-concept. Hence, they are able to challenge the dominant social identities which mostly subscribed to the idea of a woman's life is never complete without marriage.

Clearly, economic independence plays a very important factor for single women to be liberated and being free from the society's stigmatisation, marginalisation or discrimination, as expressed by all the respondents interviewed in this study.

Essentially, singleness is indeed socially constructed; this was said as much by the respondents where the social arrangement places singleness into a set of categories to differentiate it from other 'normal' categories. Relationships are constructed through categories and single is a set of category.

Hence, singlen is a social category as it can be placed under 'sameness' or 'otherness', in order to define the state of singleness. Apart from that, the category of singleness is also problematic as such as in a different historical contexts and different interactional contexts, it constitutes different meaning.

Singleness is indeed an ideological field and thus it is a discourse. The shifting patterns and meanings of singleness is in relation to power as this study has shown. The respondents from this study felt empowered and liberated because they are economically independent.

In regard to the notion that singleness ought to be studied as a set of personal narratives and subject positions, that helps to answer many questions on self-concept and self-identity which this study managed to do. Finally, singleness is about politics because as in any other kinds of politics, the development of strategies and resistance will help in the betterment of single women.

Due to the limited sample examined in this qualitative study, the results cannot be generalised to reflect the experiences of all single women in the Malaysian Malay Muslim community. Furthermore large-scale studies will be required. However, as an exploratory study, this is sufficient to guide to a larger scale of investigation.

This study is also limited in the sense that respondents resided only in the urban part of Malaysia where lifestyles are highly individualistic. Values of urban and rural women are to an extent different. Respondents were also highly educated as in all of them at least having a first degree from a university. Had the study been conducted in the rural part of Malaysia, the results might differ due to the social economic status, education level and traditions which are stronger within that kind of community.

In addition to that, this study is not looking for certain kind of answers on issues related to singlehood as this study is just trying to understand the situation of singleness within the Malaysian Malay Muslim society. It focuses on how the single women feel about being single including their well-being, their relationships with others and how they construct their identity as a single Malaysian Malay Muslim woman. As such, this paper is hoping to be a springboard for reflection or for further work in this area.

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