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Islamic Scholarship Across
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STATE, ISLAM AND MALAY WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of modernity, globalisation and Islam on Malay women. The analysis looks at ways modernity and the role of state and Islam have defined Malay women and their identity. In contemporary Malaysia, Malay women have more access to education, wage work, political rights and at the same time pursue the Islamic ideal of the good mother, ideal wife and efficient worker. The authors will illustrate that Islam is not regressive to women and the state agenda to bring change to Malay women. Instead, Islam empowers Malay women to lead more fulfilled lives. As such, by yielding to religion, culture and the state, Malay women have negotiated their lives in their own unique ways in modern Malaysia.

Introduction

This paper examines the lives of Malay women whose life events are highly influenced by the intersection of not only their biological processes as women, but by the influences of the surrounding which include their religion and the processes of modernization. It investigates the ways in which modernity, through the planned process of the state and, how Islam and the Malay culture have defined the contemporary Malay women. We will show in this paper that despite undergoing rapid forces of modernity and phases of Islamic revivalism which include the opportunities to be western educated, exposure to western values, and at the same time, being more outwardly Islamic through representation of behaviour and attire, instead of becoming "feminists", many Malay women pursue their faith diligently, negotiate and accommodate with Islamic way of behavior and practices.

The contention of this paper is to evaluate policies and the extent of Islamic intervention in the lives of Malay women, in relations to attire, the *tudung* (veil), polygamy, divorce, mothering and concept of work outside homes. We will attempt to debunk the feminist views in the West which argue that mothering is one of the roots of women's oppression in society (see Humm, 1991) and argue that it is incorrect to assume that Malay Women need to abandon their culture and tradition and adopt Western practices to improve their status. Furthermore, according to Leila Ahmed in her work on *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), Western discussions of women in Islam have trapped the struggle for women's rights within struggles over culture (see Roziyah Omar, 1994). We will also argue that Islam is a religion that respects women and encourages them to have multiple roles as daughters, wives, mothers and workers. Their abilities to manage these multiple roles have indirectly benefitted the nation, namely Malaysia.