

Education and Gender Equality: A case study of Muslim female students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Both the internationalized and globalized processes of the country and the traditional norms and conservative religious concepts regarding gender roles, work and family influence the lives of women in Malaysia. The latter can hinder them to tap their full potential: Despite outnumbering male students in secondary school and university, only 53 percent of women between the age of 15 and 64 are employed in Malaysia (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2015, p. 3-7). Against this background, the question arises how educationally successful Muslim female students develop individual educational processes to lay the foundation to pursue successful careers afterwards. The study refers to fifteen narrative in-depth interviews with Muslim female students about chances and challenges within their education. The interviews were analysed through the hermeneutic cultural analysis methodology “scenic understanding” according to Lorenzer (2006 [1985]). It is outlined that leadership programs in school can help the female students to develop skills to pursue a successful education and career. Consequently, leadership programs contribute to the sustainable development of gender’s equality and women’s empowerment.

Keywords: Malaysia; Education; Women; Leadership; Sustainable Education; Gender Equality

1. Introduction

Malaysia can be characterized by multiple societal developments. The society undergoes fundamental changes due to internationalization and globalization processes, changing family structures and rising individualism (Goethe-Institute, 2011, p. 12), while trying to harmonize these processes with the society’s “very conservative stand on religious and moral issues“ (p. 25). These diverse developments influence the Muslim adolescent’s lives relating to “values, religious belief, social relations [...] as well as their personal and social visions” (p. 25). Muslim females especially, can be caught in a conflict regarding possibilities and chances to develop individual educational pathways in dealing with different requirements they are confronted with. In this context, a wider question arises on how sustainable development according to the United Nation’s agenda can be realized in meeting the needs of all members of the society in a form of social inclusion and gender equality (United Nations, 2015, p. 4).

The paper is based on Koller's (2011) understanding of education. He refers to Humboldt's classical concept of education by defining it as a "transformation process of the world- and self-relations which may develop when humans are confronted with certain problems without being provided with means of necessity for solving them" (p. 377). When individuals find ways to overcome these problems in innovative ways, new "figures of world- and self-relation" (p. 377) can be developed.

The qualitative study at hand is based on Koller's (2011) definition of education. The study consists of detailed hermeneutic interpretations and notions of understanding of interviews with Muslim female students. The analyses reveals their educational processes, in which they transform the relations to the world and themselves to achieve their goals and aspirations.

2. Women's Lives and Education in Malaysia

Since the independence of Britain in 1957, the main focus of Malaysia's government on industrialization, economic development and globalization have led to profound changes of all aspects of life (Mahari, Othman, Khalili, Esa & Miskiman, 2011, p. 5). Especially today's youth is born and raised in a period of constant change of economic growth, changing technologies and international developments. A survey of the Goethe-Institute on the Muslim youth in Malaysia concludes that "Muslim youths in Malaysia do not differ much from their non-Muslim peer groups or from youths in western countries" (Goethe-Institute, 2011, p. 17). Nonetheless, strict traditional values and conservative gender roles remain strong in Malaysia (Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2016, p. 719). The young adults are born and raised in conservative families structures with a focus on religions norms and values. Consequently, they are "constantly reminded of what they need to do and how to be good Muslims" (Goethe-Institute, 2011, p. 15). Accordingly, they take "a very conservative stand on religious and moral issues" (p. 25) themselves.

Malaysia recognizes that women's contribution in all aspects of life is essential to guarantee the country's capacity to improve its competitiveness at an international level as well as for the sustainable development of the country. Women are recognized as "an important economic resource" (Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2016, p. 718) and decisive for a "productive and prosperous society" (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2015, E-24). Multiple strategies for women's educational advancement were implemented. As a result, their educational

participation has increased enormously in the last decades. Today, female students outperform male students at every levels. Attention should be paid to the university level, where females “comprise approximately 70% of the cohort” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012, E-7). However, women still have to face barriers regarding their participation in the labor market in Malaysia. A look at the labor force participation illustrates that the achievements of females in the educational system are not reflected in their participation in labor force. Only 53 percent of women within the working age are employed (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2015, E-7). In addition to that, women “tend to drop out of the labor force after childbirth” (Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2016, p. 720). Therefore, women are challenged to balance a successful career and the role as wives and mothers. Another aggravating perception is that Muslim women in Malaysia are disadvantaged due to the Islamic law in Malaysia in relation to marriage, divorce, alimony payments and as well as their legacies (Endut, 2015; Derichs, 2010).

Research on Muslim women in Malaysia focuses on work, family and the various challenges of women, which are mentioned above. However, there is a gap in qualitative research on Muslim females in Malaysia and their multiple developments in their adolescence and youth relating to educational processes. Therefore, this qualitative research study investigates the education of Muslim female students in Malaysia. The question will be discussed on how they approach the requirements of being encouraged to keep up with the internationalization and globalization processes of the country, while facing potential restrictions because of traditional and conservative stances. The study contributes to the identification of individual strategies of Muslim female students to push for equal opportunities and gender equality as part of sustainable development in the challenging conditions.

3. Sustainable Development and Leadership Education

The United Nations’ (2015) agenda for sustainable development covers seventeen development goals “in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet” (p. 1). Hence, the agenda aims at realizing “the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls“ (p. 1), so that “all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality” (p. 2). Sustainable development can only be realized when “every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed” (p. 4). The United Nations Secretary-General’s high-level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012) clarifies that gender equality is essential for sustainable

development because “the next increment of global growth could come well from the full economic empowerment of women“ (p. 14).

The educational system of Malaysia aims at preparing the students for “the needs of the 21st century” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012, p. E-1). It provides them with opportunities to “improve their lives, become successful members of the community and active contributors to the national development” (p. E-1). Particularly leadership skills are stressed as one of the most important key attributes, which need to be developed by every Malaysian student to lead and to work effectively in a globalized and internationalized world (p. E-10). According to the Ministry of Education’s (2012) Education Blueprint leadership means to take “the initiative to create and develop one’s own solutions” (p. 2-5) by strengthening the resilience, emotional intelligence and communication skills. Leadership skills are expected to foster all Malaysian students to reach their “full potential” (p. 2-5), regardless of their gender, ethnical background and religion.

It is appealing to focus on learning opportunities of female students in the leadership programs because leadership skills can help individuals of diverse backgrounds to react to new personal challenges as well as social, economic and environmental challenges. In consequence, leadership programs can ensure a transformation of the society relating to equality of opportunities for all and for sustainable development of the country.

4. Methodological Design: Object and Method

I conducted 15 narrative interviews with educationally successful Muslim female students in Malaysia. The students were asked about their chances and challenges in their education. The narrative structure of the interviews initiated a self-reflection, so that their personal thoughts and memories were the focus of the interviews. Hence, it was possible to get access to the students’ individual experiences and realities.

The interviews were analysed using the method of “scenic understanding” according to Lorenzer (2006 [1985]). This methodology is based on an in-depth hermeneutic cultural analysis methodology, which seeks the understanding of the unconscious meaning of interviews and texts.

According to Salling Olesen and Weber (2012) the focus on multi-layered meanings of texts and interviews help to go “beyond individual and biographically specific reception patterns” (p. 9). Lorenzer (1986) assumes that shedding light on latent meaning of interviews

and texts leads to an identification of collective social processes, relations and realities, which are not immediately visible and are unexpressed by the interviewees. He considers the latent meaning as a result of experiences of social interaction with the world, which is excluded from the obvious communication structures. Accordingly, single case analyses are seen as representations of shared cultural experiences and social dynamics through the subjective experiences of individuals (Salling Olesen and Weber, 2012, p. 7).

To identify the unconscious meaning, the obvious referential content, the meta-communicative content, and the understanding of the interview by means of theoretical knowledge and background factual knowledge is to be analysed (Salling Olesen and Weber, 2012, p. 20-21). Thereby the societal, collective motives and meanings can be carved out. Subsequently, the analysed interviews were recapitulated in form of case narratives, which caters to the holistic views on the reality of the interviewees. Generalisations can be elucidated by focussing on aspects which all single case analysis have in common (Geertz, 1983, p. 37).

5. Case Analysis: Nor

The following case analysis gives an insight into the realities of Muslim female students in Malaysia.

Nor is 24 years old at the time of the interview. She holds a bachelor degree in physics and has started her master studies in sustainability shortly afterwards. After graduation, she plans to do a PhD thesis. Nor has two older brothers and a younger sister who still live with her family in a small village in a rural part of Malaysia.

After finishing the secondary school, Nor went to a boarding school to take the university-entrance diploma. She decided to go to a boarding school because she wanted to “get new experiences” and wanted to “try to be independent”. It was a very challenging time for the family when Nor told them her intention to study at a boarding school, away from the family’s village. Initially, her parents did not want her to move out of the house. They feared that other family members or the neighbors would talk about her. In addition to that, her parents had to pay the school fee, although they are “not so rich” according to Nor. Still, her parents wanted to give Nor the opportunity because she promised them both she wants to be educationally successful and “be a good daughter”. Nor’s motivation in studying is “to become a successful person”:

“I want to help my family first. [...] I have passion to help my family to get a better life.

I think I have to study hard and I have to make my family proud of me. I have to repay them for what they have done for me.”

Her family is proud of Nor and nowadays they even encourage her: “They tell me to do it better because it is good for me and for my family as well”.

Next to her parents and her siblings, the religion too, helps Nor to stay motivated and to be educationally successful. She tells that reciting the Quran gives her hope and “peace” after an exhausting day:

“In my opinion, I think... Religion is something like a factor to educate people or one of the factors that make someone to be educated and to start focusing on education. We all need the religion as part in our lives to follow the right path, doing the right things and still keeping up with struggles in our daily lives.”

Nor is always eager to learn more about religion because she did not have the opportunity to gain knowledge about Islam in her family:

“My parents are very religious. They pray, they fast... but they can't teach me properly about Islam and they can't answer my questions about religion. They do what all people do but they don't know why because they did not read or understand the Quran. Sometimes they have wrong ideas and I have to talk to them why it is not like that and that my life is not wrong.”

That is why she joined the extracurricular activities in the boarding school that combined religious education as well as leadership education. Nor wanted to learn more about “how and what you should do as a Muslim” and at the same time how she can be a leader for others. She explains that she experienced that a lot of people in her village believe that according to Islam women cannot be leaders:

“People believe that Islam says that in families, you have to be the father to be the leader of the family. [...] So they think because of this, women cannot be leaders.”

Nor wants to show that being religious, independent and living “a modern live in Malaysia” are no contradictions for women. She clarifies that according to Islam, there “is no discrimination between men and women. You can vote, you can do anything”. She explains

that “women also have the right to be a leader and to be successful. Education is important for all. I want to say that to everyone who thinks that it is not like that”. She says: “I just want to get my rights as a women”. She does not want to “feel inferior to all the man in the society who always talk about women in a bad way and do not see women as equal to them”.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The interview with Nor exemplifies that educationally successful Muslim female students in Malaysia can grow apart from the lives of their parents and families. Most of them are born and raised in traditional family structures with conservative norms and religious values, while embracing the internationalized world with different cultures and value-systems they live in. The female students are challenged to keep pace with the profound developments of the country and stay connected to their families and the society at the very same time. Gültekin (2003) who investigated young Muslim females in Germany describes that the females need the ability of a “multiple orientation” in different areas of life.

Developing leadership skill is for the interviewed female students one approach to develop the required ability of “multiple orientation”. The female students explained that in the leadership programs in schools they were taught of innovative thinking and problem-solving skills. Hence, leadership skills helped them to find individual ways and foster individual interests while measuring up to the expectations of their families and the society. In the words of Koller (2011), leadership programs inspire them to find ways to develop new and innovative “figures of the world and self-relation” (p. 377). Consequently, they can unleash their full potential and contribute to Malaysia’s sustainable development regarding gender equality, which is one of the most important sustainable development goals of the United Nations (2015). For the female students, religion is an important part of their lives. However, they do not experience religious traditions as unchangeable, but as negotiable and modify them in new ways. Hence, they re-interpret religion, religious norms and values in new ways, which match their individual lifestyles. This modification lead to partial changes within the family and the society relating to autonomy and individualism. Religion is experienced as a bridge, which connects them to the family and the society and opens up new visions of life. Thereby, they do not experience different requirements, which they are confronted with as incompatible. They rather find ways to experience them as complementary to one another.

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