

# **DOING GENDER STUDIES AND SELECTED ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF GENDER: AN INTRODUCTION**

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## **Introduction**

Year 2010 marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Gender Studies Program. This special issue of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Journal SARJANA is in celebration of these 15 years the Gender Studies Program has been in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. This volume comes out of a small but committed group of lecturers, researchers and women's rights activists and their contribution is a manifestation of their dedication to the issue of gender.

College and university-level women's studies classes in the United States were first offered in the late 1960s and early 1970s following the realization that academic research and teaching were based on white, middle-class male perspectives and experiences. Women's studies programs were launched in academic institutions in Europe and Asia in the following decades. The Gender Studies Program at the University Malaya, initiated in 1996, is the only program in Malaysia offering a minor in Gender Studies. Like its counterparts in other countries, the Gender Studies Program explores traditional topics from alternative viewpoints and from a gender perspective (see for example, Brush, Gold, & White, 1978; Macalister, 1999).

Merits in the Gender Studies Program being a stand alone program/ department/ institute at the University of Malaya is as follows:

- Visibility
- Potential to expand into a research institute, with postgraduate and undergraduate teaching
- Potential for internationalization
- Contribute towards strengthening University of Malaya's position as a research university
- Offering innovative, cutting edge courses
- Inter and trans disciplinary research and teaching

This special issue highlights the history, development and growth of gender studies at the University of Malaya. A few selected issues in the study of gender have also been included from writers who are mainly academic staffs of the Gender Studies program and associates who have been goodwill lecturers and supporters of the program. It also shows the possibility for future inter and trans-disciplinary work. This initial effort although small if nurtured and supported can grow into something we can be proud of. The first three articles focus on the Gender Studies Program and the impact of doing gender studies at the University of Malaya and the other articles cover a wide range of themes like International Law and Malaysia's Committed to Women's Rights, Women and Religion, Women and Agriculture, Muslim Marriage and the Law, Life Histories - Women and Leadership and Women and Change.

This special issue volume covers several topics. The contributors have diverse disciplinary backgrounds and approaches. However, they all share a concern to maintain a focus on social change and activism. Collectively, the articles in this volume are valuable to academics and students interested in the field of women's/gender studies.

The first three chapters deal with the establishment, the impact of gender studies on student's employment and employability and the reflections of students on why they do gender studies.

Shanthi Thambiah discusses women's studies and gender studies as new fields struggling to be accepted as legitimate academic fields equal to mainstream disciplines. In the early years, women's studies were resisted because of the fear that it would breed anti-men attitudes, and it was also accused of merely imitating western feminism. Despite this resistance, the academic and intellectual validity of women's studies and gender studies was gradually recognized because of the research done by early feminists. It also challenged earlier knowledge that formed mainstream thinking. This new knowledge and awareness brought many changes. Public universities were also urged to look into ways of contributing towards uplifting the status of women. She goes on to do a profile of both teaching and research done at the Gender Studies Program of the University of Malaya.

Maimuna Hamid Merican and Ruhana Padzil's article focuses on gender studies as a transformative project which imparts not only knowledge and learning but significantly affects all areas of lives of those who participate in it. The aim of this article is to determine whether Gender Studies training impacts on undergraduate students' lives. The findings from this highlight whether the Gender Studies Program, has met its objectives in creating gender awareness and critical thinking in individuals who can shape a just and equal society free from all discriminations particularly discrimination against women. It is important to conduct this analysis as Gender Studies training contributes towards feminists' activism through its teaching and learning process. Besides examining the impact of Gender Studies on our undergraduate students' lives, the other dimension to the paper is also to obtain feminist critiques about the significance of Gender Studies as an academic entity and feminism as a social movement.

The third article dealing with doing gender studies by Ruhana Padzil, Shanthi Thambiah, Pauline I Erera and Maimuna Hamid Merican examines the impact of students' participation in Gender Studies Programme, University of Malaya on employment and graduate studies. The study surveyed all those students that could be locate from the Dean's Office Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences database and focused on graduates who minored in Gender Studies since the session 1996/97 when the programme was established to the 2006/07 academic session. The study found that participation in the Gender Studies Programme had a significant and positive impact on the lives of the graduates in the following areas:

- Almost all the graduates (93%) were employed full time.
- Over half (53.5%) had jobs that were related to gender studies.
- Just under half (46.5) reported that the Gender Studies Programme had opened up job possibilities for them.
- Close to one third (28%) had pursued graduate studies since graduating from the University of Malaya.

Sharifah Syahirah Syed Sheikh's article attempts to analyze the implementation of CEDAW in Malaysia from the human rights-based perspective. It consists of background and matters related to CEDAW, discussion on the human rights based analysis of the CEDAW, Malaysia's position on CEDAW reservations, and actors involved. The core discussion of this paper is the analysis of CEDAW's implementation in Malaysia. This article analyzed three main documents, which are the State Formal Report 2004 (initial and periodic report), NGO's Shadow CEDAW Report (2004) and CEDAW Committee's Concluding Comments (2006).

Lai Suat Yan discusses the conceptual understanding of the term empowerment as contributing to transforming unequal gender relations focusing on the context of the struggle for full ordination as *bhikkhuni* for religious women in the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition. As *bhikkhunis*, religious women move to a higher moral realm and is considered as "fields-of-merit", a status previously available only to men who have access to full ordination. However, the relevance of the term empowerment is also critiqued firstly, from a feminist perspective that it is derived from a patriarchal discourse fixated with power. Secondly, the notion of empowerment is analyzed from a Buddhist perspective of non-attachment or letting go. In the process of discussing the relevance of the term empowerment the social position of *mae jis* (religious women who observe eight precepts, shave their heads and wear white robes) are highlighted. Broadly, the struggle for the ordination as *bhikkhuni* for religious women is situated in the debate on whether Buddhism supports gender in/equality.

Raiha bte Ahmad examines the Green Revolution which led to a transition in paddy cultivation from traditional paddy cultivation techniques to the use of machines

together with the application of high quality seeds. The research was conducted in 2006 and carried out in two villages in the Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia. Her article attempts to review the implementation of the Green Revolution that began around 1970s and discusses its impact on the socio-economy of women. Socio-economic impact on women is measured through the pattern of distribution of labour, ownership and management of land, employment and income of the women farmers from 1975 to 2006. The method of in-depth interviews and observation were used to gather information from 14 women who had worked in the paddy fields and who were also land owners. This study shows how these women farmers began moving out of agricultural work when their labour began to be replaced by mechanisation. This led to a shift in the women's choices of employment and without realising it, their identities as managers of farms and land owners gradually eroded. She raises the question whether this transition towards work outside the farms was driven by individual impetus or the outcome of the impact of mechanisation brought about by the Green Revolution. This article attempts to address this question and demonstrates the marginalisation of women from agricultural activities that took place due to the Green Revolution.

Raihanah Abdullah examines the inter-relationship between divorce and polygamous marriage amongst the Malays in Malaysia. The article firstly, expounds on the high incidence of divorce amongst the Malays by drawing on the work done by anthropologists and sociologists. Following that polygamous marriage as practiced in Malaysia is deliberated. The link between the applications for entering into polygamous marriage with divorce is examined. Finally, the abuses suffered by wives in polygamous marriages and the laws to protect them were discussed.

Arba'iyah Mohd Noor in her article sketched out the contributions of Tan Sri Hajjah Aishah Abdul Ghani as a leader in Malaysian politics. Since her youth she has shown leadership qualities. She was born on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1924 and was the youngest amongst five siblings. She was very focused on getting a good education although she had to face many obstacles. Her involvement in politics began in the 1940s and was a leading female nationalist in the struggle for independence. She was the first AWAS (Angkatan Wanita Sedar) leader and was a member of PKMM (Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya) before joining UMNO. She went on to head Wanita UMNO and became the Minister of Welfare in 1973. As a Minister she was able to put in place many welfare programs and paid special attention to women's needs. She is also known for her efforts in the formulation of the Islamic Family Law which was passed in 1982, and the need for all states to follow a uniform Islamic Family Law for without the uniformity women faced many problems.

Ahmad Kamal Ariffin bin Mohd Rus describes the multi-faceted contributions of Tan Sri Datin Cempaka Hajjah Kontik Kamariah. She was active in the field of education, championed the cooperative movement, was a respected female personality in Malaysian politics and was also known for her social activism. Born in 1911 she was not the conventional Malay women and was very active in sports in her childhood days and went on to get a Malay and English education. She was ambitious and was instrumental in developing the cooperative movement and is fondly remembered

for developing a housing estate through the cooperative that she served. She showed leadership qualities in politics and in her social activism. This article is a life history of a woman who was successful in many fields at a time when women were hardly visible in the public domain.

Yusmarni Djalius's article discusses the changes faced by Minangkabau women. Firstly, the paper traces Minang women's position within the traditional Minangkabau adat. Next the article deals with changes faced by women in the colonial and post-colonial periods and their role in embracing progress through the examination of their contribution in education and the mass-media (newspapers). Finally, the article concludes with the challenges faced by the Minangkabau today.

## REFERENCES

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