Dynamics of Gender, Religion and Education among Young Female Muslims in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper provides an insight into the lives of Muslim female students in Malaysia, a country currently undergoing multiple developments entailing continuous societal pluralisation and diversification with concomitant retention of the centrality of religious values. Accordingly, young people in Malaysia are exposed to a range of different worldviews and value systems, while frequently growing up in families which place emphasis on religious norms. On the basis of in-depth interviews with Muslim female students, the paper explores the interrelationships between the diversity categories of gender, religion and academic ability, and demonstrates that ability and religion serve as resources enabling the interviewees to simultaneously pursue autonomy and maintain ties to their families. In a broader context, the paper provides a critical analysis of the

frequently one-dimensional discourse on Muslim women by giving voice to the diversity of their perspectives and experiences.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of diversity has been a key object of discussion and debate within the social sciences (Prengel 2013, 11). According to Sen (1992), the notion of diversity highlights the fact that the individual's identity is shaped by a range of interrelated categories:

> We are deeply diverse in our internal characteristics (such as age, gender, general abilities, particular talents, proneness to illnesses, and so on) as well as in external circumstances (such as ownership of assets, social backgrounds, environmental predicaments, and so on). It is precisely because of such diversity that the insistence on egalitarianism in one field requires the rejection of egalitarianism in another (*Ibidem* XI).

Diversity has both a descriptive and a normative meaning. The latter links the term to an affirmative association with the equality of all. This may raise issues including the need for a balance between egalitarianism and special treatment, or, as Allemann-Ghionda (2018, forthcoming) puts it, «a balance […] between positive discrimination and equity». The normative perspective on diversity is also important in regard to Vertovec's (2007) concept of "super-diversity", which refers to the fact that societies have become increasingly pluralised due to a continuous increase in multifaceted social formations and dynamic interplays among several categories of diversity. Hence the challenge is to guarantee the equality of all, non-discrimination and equal opportunities in the economic, political, social and cultural life of societies, regardless of individuals'

gender, ethnicity, age, abilities, religion, (…) and of the interrelationships among these diversity categories.

A survey on young people in South East Asia conducted by the Goethe-Institut (2011) has found that Malaysia, like other countries, is currently undergoing a process of fundamental change and diversification. Noor and Mohd Mahudin (2016) describe these developments as resulting from «modernization, globalization and rapid technological advances» (717) due to the widespread use of social media, increased geographical mobility, exposure to a range of worldviews and value systems, and/or individuals' involvement in relationships crossing national borders. Adolescents and young adults are thus influenced by «different cultures, views and value-systems» (Goethe-Institut 2011, 2) and their lives and identities have become more dynamic, complex and mutable in the multifaceted and constantly changing social environment. In addition and seemingly by contrast - to this, young people in Malaysia have been found to take a «very conservative stand on religious and moral issues» (*Ibidem* 50) and most of them «grow up in conservative households, where religious values are stressed» (*Ibidem* 2).

There has hitherto been a gap in in-depth research on the «lived experiences of [Malaysian] men and women within their multiple roles» (Noor and Mohd Mahudin 2016, 731). To begin meeting this need, the qualitative research study at hand investigates how Muslim female students in Malaysia negotiate their ways of life and their educational trajectories in the context of their families. The work took place within the research and development project «Pupils' Diversity and Success in Science Education in Germany and Malaysia» at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. The project, funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) as part of the programme «Higher Education Dialogue with the Muslim World» sought to demonstrate the potential of higher education institutions to promote cultural dialogue with the Islamic world on the basis of academic reflection and the deconstruction of stereotypes.

2. Research studies on young female Muslims

A number of research studies have explored the competing demands on young Muslims by considering various categories of diversity, such as gender and/or religion. Several of

these categories are of relevance to discussion of Muslim female students' lives in Malaysia.

Most extant studies focus on Muslim adolescents and young adults in the context of immigration. Boos-Nünning (2015) points out that, in general, most immigrant Muslim families in Germany value education and not only wish, but also expect their children to be educationally successful. In addition, the author highlights the strong familial bonds between parents and children. Studies conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s (Basit 1997; Haw 2011; Khan 2010; Salih 2004), backed up by work carried out in recent years (Ghaffar-Kucher 2015) on immigrant Muslim children and adolescents in non-Muslim countries, found that processes of pluralisation in these young people's lives may partially alienate them from their parents. In this field of tension, religion and education are considered mediators that can bridge the gap between individual lifestyles and sets of values while enabling young people to retain close family relationships. For example, Arar *et al.* (2013) explain that education gives young Muslim adults in Israel and Jordan stability and fosters their individual identities while balancing multiple expectations stemming from their families and the societies they live in. Nökel (2002) established the term "neo-Muslim" to describe young Muslim females who have become integrated into German society through educational success. Simultaneously developing strong affiliations with religion, they nevertheless experience religious practices within the family, which they often associate with a prescribed understanding of gender roles, as inappropriate to them. They consequently challenge their parents' viewpoints by focusing on alternative interpretations of religion. As a result, they remain connected to their families of origin on a religious basis, while pursuing and establishing their own aims and ways of living. Likewise, the work by Tietze (2001) on young Muslims in Germany found that religion and family traditions, norms and values helped young people to find stability after immigration to Germany.

Several studies focus on Muslim adolescents and young adults who have no experience of immigration, but face similar challenges in their countries of birth. Hunner-Kreisel (2006), exploring the lives of young female Muslims in Azerbaijan, concludes that an individual interpretation of religion gives them opportunities for self-development that enable them to push for autonomy. As a result, they establish new

concepts of being female. Smith-Hefner (2007) draws a similar conclusion, finding that educational success and wearing a headscarf both help women in Indonesia to strive for autonomy within their specific family setup. Mehran (2003) and Shavarini (2011 [2005]) have described how women in Iran pursue educational success, leading to improvements in their lives, in the context of recent developments seen in the country.

These studies deliver rich findings and insights into the lives of Muslim adolescents and young adults in various societies and nation states. However, it is notable that many of them proceed on the assumption that young Muslims experience their lives as contradictory, challenging and conflicted and as putting them in opposition to their families' lives, which prioritise so-called traditional values and norms. This paper, in addressing Muslim female students' lives in Malaysia, critically discusses the question of how they perceive the different social environments they are exposed to. Its aim is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the significance of religion, education and the family to these young women's lives. The focus on Malaysia is of particular relevance in this context because the country is currently experiencing fundamental changes entailing continuous societal pluralisation and diversification with concomitant retention of the centrality of religious values. The paper thus challenges the misconception that religiosity is necessarily equitable with hostility towards modernisation.

3. Context of the study

Any exploration of the lives of Muslim women in Malaysia in the context of the issue of gender equality tends to result in contradictory findings. On the one hand, Malaysian women have been recognised as «an important part of addressing the talent gap in Malaysia, to achieve [the country's] socio-economic development objectives» (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia 2015, 3-25), which include the pursuit of industrialisation and the improvement of competitiveness at an international level. Access to and participation in education for girls and young female adults has improved substantially in Malaysia since the country's independence from Britain in 1957, particularly in recent decades. While the enrolment of girls in school at primary level remained almost constant between 1970 and 2007/2008, enrolment at secondary level increased by about

ten percent, at post-compulsory level by about 20 percent, and at university level by almost 30 percent, rising from 29.1 percent of young women in 1970 to 61.9 percent in 2007/2008 (Noor and Mohd Mahudin 2016, 717). According to Mahari *et al.* (2011, 5) the educational success of Malaysian women has led to encompassing and unparalleled changes in all aspects of their lives, including a greater role and higher-status positions in society. In contrast to these improvements, recent statistics illustrate that women's achievements in Malaysia's educational system are not reflected in their participation in the labour force. Only 43.6 percent of working-age women are employed (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia 2015, 3-7). Further, the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2010-2015 (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia 2010) notes that young women tend to exit the labour force after giving birth (178). These statistical data demonstrate that women still face challenges in the labour market and are an economically disadvantaged group, despite being impressively successful in education and having all the requisite skills and qualifications to take a full part in the country's labour force.

Endut *et al.* (2018, forthcoming), who conducted a study on patriarchy and the perspective of students on masculinity in Malaysia, explain the remaining gender inequality in the country by referring to patriarchal structures which continue to be a «lived reality for many women in Malaysia», determining both their private and public lives. Similarly, the investigation by Rossenkhan *et al.* (2016) of Muslim women managers' careers in Malaysia found that they face challenges in balancing a successful career with their role as wives and mothers because cultural values espousing conventional gender roles remain strong. Azmawati and Endut (2018, forthcoming) indeed assert that «[o]ver the years, the patriarchal system in Malaysia has become very prevalent and customary». According to Noor and Mohd Mahudin (2016), the «socialization of males and females adheres strictly to traditional cultural values with males being trained to be independent and assertive while females are expected to be effeminate [sic!] and polite» (717). As a result, women's «voices have not been adequately and promptly recognized» (Azmawati and Endut 2018, forthcoming). An aggravating factor is the disadvantage to Muslim women in Malaysia, as pointed out by Derichs (2010) and Endut (2015), in relation to marriage, divorce, alimony payments and inheritance in consequence of restrictive interpretations of Islamic law.

4. Research methodology

The qualitative research study at hand discusses how Muslim female students in today's Malaysia negotiate their lifestyles and educational trajectories in the context of religion and the family. During fieldwork at the project's partner university in Malaysia in 2015, the researcher conducted a total of twelve in-depth interviews with Muslim female students aged between 20 and 28. The strategy for selection of interviewees was based on the «snowball effect» (Reinders 2012). To enlarge the sample, the researcher contacted additional gatekeepers, such as university staff, who referred further interviewees to the researcher. The interviews took place at different places on the university's campus, such as in the library, in cafés or seminar rooms.

The interviewees, who originate from diverse socio-economic and family backgrounds, were all born in Malaysia, went through the Malaysian school system and were Bachelor's or Master's degree students at the time of the interview. Most of the interviewees were not born in the Malaysian state in which the university they attend is located, and therefore do not live in their family homes. Despite this, all interviewees maintained lasting and profound relationships with family members through modern means of communication and regular visits.

The focus of the in-depth interviews was the students' education, their experiences at school, at university and in their families, and religious practices in their day-to-day lives. The interviews encouraged storytelling and self-reflection, which promise particularly useful insights into the interviewees' experiences and the ways in which they make sense of them in the wider environment. All interviewees were distinctly communicative, which was of importance and benefit to the in-depth interview situation. However, some of them were unfamiliar with the typical structure and setting of an in-depth interview and did not respond fully to the storytelling prompt. Therefore the interviewer employed further stimuli, such as alternative versions of the opening question, in order to elicit more narrations.

Analysis of the interviews proceeded on the basis of Lorenzer's (2006 [1985]) method of «scenic understanding» to understand the multiple layers of meaning within the conversations that had taken place. This methodology permits the identification of social processes, relationships and realities which are not immediately visible and

remain unexpressed by the interviewees. Interpretation of the interviews drew on associations and mental connections. It always commenced with the collection of «first impressions» (Salling Olesen and Weber 2012), on the basis of which the researcher then focused on specific sequences in order to validate, revise or repudiate these initial approaches to understanding. The researcher further inferred information on the significance to the interviewees of education and religion. Concluding, the researcher, including further sequences in the analysis, presented the findings in the form of a single case analysis to the end of attaining a holistic and realistic view of the interviewee's reality. Quantitative findings cannot be provided, but certain generalisations by identifying aspects that all single case analyses have in common may be established (Geertz 1983).

Chakkarath (2006) points out that interpretations are always culture-bound, and consequently raises the question of whether it is even possible to understand and/or analyse interviews or texts where interlocutors or authors are located in different cultures (272). He suggests critical discussion and reflection of diverse interpretations as essential. His ideas are very similar to the patterns of argumentation in Spivak's (1988) essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Spivak discusses the ethical problems associated with investigating a different culture, or, more precisely, the difficulties of privileged Western white males investigating other cultures by using Eurocentric concepts and frameworks to speak for individuals without giving them the chance to speak for themselves. The researcher attempted to do justice to both Spivak's critique and Chakkarath's proposals by embedding the interpretation of the interviews in the context of a group whose members came from diverse backgrounds. In addition, regular meetings with young and senior researchers in Malaysia were held, providing a forum for critical discussion of the study's design and findings. All this notwithstanding, there is no guarantee that the interviews have been understood and interpreted "correctly". The interpretation of the interviews results from what the researcher has understood, experienced, seen, perceived, and critically checked. However, it is of course the case that the readers of this paper may develop their own interpretations.

5. Case studies

The following section will detail two case studies which provide insights into Muslim female students' lives in Malaysia. The case studies were chosen because they focus on interviewees with contrasting social backgrounds and living conditions, while still containing aspects that all case studies in the sample have in common: the role of the family in the interviewees' lives, the ways in which the interviewees initiate change within their familial structures, and their strategies for emancipating themselves in today's diversified Malaysian society.

5.1. Case study: Sharifah

At the time of the interview Sharifah was 23 years old. She and her younger sister were born in a medium-sized town in Malaysia into a wealthy family. Her mother is a housewife and her father works in an international company. From time to time, his wife and daughters accompany him on business trips abroad.

After attending a primary school near her family home, Sharifah qualified through her final examinations for a place at a boarding school for gifted students in a city far away from her family. After graduating from school, she won a scholarship to study for a Bachelor's degree in anthropology in Canada. Back in Malaysia, she commenced her Master's degree studies at a university, and plans to become an academic. Sharifah explained that the educational decisions taken by her and her parents happened by chance rather than in pursuit of specific goals. Her parents did not plan to send her to the boarding school, neither did she decide herself to study in Canada. Additionally, she only decided to study anthropology because her grades were not good enough to study science. After her return from Canada she found her Master's degree programme by chance. Sharifah summed up her education by saying: «[...] I think most of the time I just follow the flow. [...] I don't know. If I think of it now I did not do many choices».

In Sharifah's view, her parents tend not to have specific expectations regarding her education and sanctioned her decisions while expecting her to be educationally successful. She expressed a feeling of gratitude and felt motivated to fulfil her parents' expectations:

> When it comes to education, I discuss every single step with my parents. They give me so many opportunities and I want to see them proud and happy, ya. So it's essential for me to have their "ok, do this!" It's not that they would say "no" to me because they trust me but I still want to discuss with them and can say that I want to attend a conference somewhere to learn and then they will let me go. It's a win-win for us.

Sharifah explained that she has a very close relationship with her family, although she moved out of their house at the age of twelve. She is constantly in touch with them and spends almost every weekend with them. She feels that she has «changed a lot» compared to her sister, who is «still the same and similar to mum and dad». However, she has noticed that her parents have encouraged her younger sister to study abroad because «they think it went really well with me».

After discussing education and Sharifah's family, the interview shifted to the topic of religion:

> I think mostly when I was in primary school with my family. It's just the general or normal things [...] like you have to fast, my mother even forced me to pray until I was like nine or ten years old. [...] When I was 13 that was the first time to have to wear scarf fully [...] because actually the school obliged us to wear it. [...] And then after that it slowly build in me then I think "Oh, it is very comfortable and everything". That's why I stay and have to wear scarf. [...] If I think about it now, when I was in that boarding school it is where I got the most of my religious teaching […]. But in boarding school at the first day there was a lot of forcing, but then when you will force everyday it becomes your own thing. [...] I did not really educate. Mostly our seniors in school and also the teachers told us what to do and we did it.

When she moved to Canada for her studies, she was a member of a religious association. As a result, she began to reflect on religion and felt that it became a more important part of her life. She considers herself to have been «a better Muslim» while she was abroad because religion gave her inner stability and a sense of home in a foreign

country. However, after her return to Malaysia religion was relegated to a subordinate part in her life:

> [...] I feel sad right now because after coming back I did not continue with all those things. [...] Even though I am not practising very strict like religious people, but I think I try my best to follow [...] as much as I can. I hope, I make it more an effort in future or now to be a better Muslim, but I don't think it plays an important role. I simply do what my family expects from me as a girl and a Muslim. And that's something we can all agree upon even when they are not happy that I want to travel again or change the university. They trust me because I show them that I am a good daughter even when my life is very different and for them sometimes not understandable.

At the very end of the interview Sharifah talked about Malaysia. She explained that her pluralised life provokes a degree of displeasure in her personal environment, and that «people [...] talk and it feels bad». She fears that others' judgement might «influence my family or professors». She consequently avoids drawing negative attention to herself: «I stick to religion and I am a good girl and a good daughter».

Sharifah is the eldest daughter of a well-off family who is able to give her many opportunities to travel abroad and gain exposure to diverse perspectives on life. Frequent episodes of change have characterised her life, which is markedly influenced by international tendencies. These experiences have enabled her to develop a strong sense of the effects on people's lives of individualisation and pluralisation, both of which processes are important to her. Sharifah's parents support her goals and aspirations but expect her to adapt to societal expectations regarding the role of women alongside being educationally successful. Sharifah ambitiously fulfils her parents' expectations and wishes. However, it is evident that her pursuit of formal qualifications and a certain position within Malaysian society is not driven by passion for her field of study. She does not appear to have any personal emotional attachment to her education and does not make expressions of intrinsic motivation or enthusiasm for her choice of studies. Instead, education appears to serve as an instrument for her to achieve the way of life she hopes to attain.

Additionally, Sharifah's statements in the interview allow the conclusion that she is not very religious and that her religious practice has the purpose of satisfying the requirements of her family, her teachers and professors and society. However, religion temporarily acquired a different significance for her when she moved to Canada for her studies and began to reflect on the meaning of religion in her life. While she was far away from her family and her country of origin, religion helped her to find a sense of stability. Additionally, religion appeared to her as a connecting factor which generated a sense of identity and a bond to her family and Malaysian society. However, when she returned to Malaysia this period of intellectual and emotional reflection came to an end and the significance of religion to Sharifah returned to the level it had occupied before she moved abroad. Sharifah explained that adherence to religious norms, values and traditions enables her to avoid coming into conflict with members of Malaysian society who do not accept and/or understand her lifestyle and pluralistic identity, but respect her religious integrity.

Sharifah does not experience any sense of contradiction or conflict between herself and her parents. Indeed, she wants to maintain close ties to her parents and her sister and could not imagine being without a close relationship with them. She does not experience her parents' expectations regarding her role in society and her education as restrictive; it appears rather to be the case that she has deeply internalised them because she knows that educational success and adapting to prevailing societal values will help her to achieve her dreams and aspirations. In this way, perhaps paradoxically, her demonstrative traditionalism has initiated change within her family, because her parents have gained the confidence from her experience to feel comfortable with encouraging her younger sister to follow Sharifah's path.

5.2. Case study: Siti

At the time of the interview Siti was 22 years old. She was born in a suburban town in Malaysia, where her parents and seven siblings still live. Her father is a factory worker, while her mother is a housewife and responsible for raising the children. Siti moved out of the family home several years ago in order to study. Her Bachelor's degree in physics made her the first member of her family to attain a university degree. Siti is ea-

ger to continue her education and has applied for a place on a Master's programme. Alongside her studies, she works as a private tutor and occupies a leadership position in an Islamic organisation.

In the first part of the interview, Siti talked extensively about education and her educational achievements at primary and secondary school as well as at university. She considers education an important value in Islam and was taught that she had to be successful so she could serve as a role model for others. She consequently feels responsible for her siblings' education and aims at inspiring them to follow her path:

> I lived in a rural area where not many people have success. When I became the one who is successful – I mean I have a degree. [...] – I want everyone feel... it is a good thing to feel successful. [...] I don't want to stay and just rest at home. [...]. I want to be the inspiration for them. Especially for my brothers and sisters. But it was hard.

It has not escaped her that a university degree has the potential to improve her social position: «[...] [e]ducation is something which can upgrade our lives». However, Siti's ambition and her educational goals have also presented her with challenges. Initially, her parents struggled to understand her desire to continue her studies. She told the interviewer that it was very difficult for her to convince her parents to let her move out and start studying at a university far away from her family. They were worried that Siti would destroy the «reputation of the family» by being exposed to different cultures, values and perspectives on life that might negatively influence her. Accordingly, as she explained in the interview, they kept a close eye on her and checked up on her suspiciously during the first year of her studies because they «didn't want our neighbours to talk». She expressed understanding towards their behaviour, commenting: «They needed to control me! But now they are fine with it and even give my sisters more freedom because they have good experiences with me».

In Siti's account, the principal persuasive factor in her parents' allowing her more opportunities to pursue her own path in life was her devotion to Islam. Siti considers herself and her family to be highly religious and explained in the interview that she ded-

icates her whole life to Islam. She described how she constantly shows her parents through her actions that she respects the religion's values. She proudly added that her parents and siblings began to ask her about religious issues when she took up her leadership position within the religious organisation. In these family conversations she focuses on characteristics of Islam that emphasise gender equality and education for all. This enables her to alter her parents' perceptions and to successively attain greater independence for her and her siblings. Additionally, religion helps her to gain a sense of stability amid her constant exposure to a range of different values, norms and lifestyles on campus. She described how

> [e]verything was new at the campus and I wasn't aware that everything so different compared to my home. I became more religious because it helped me to find peace after a long day of work and seeing so many different things.

Since her parents began trusting her, Siti has felt a burden of responsibility to succeed: «I don't forget what they have done for me. They sacrifice many things for me to come here». She considers her parents as the most important people in her life and tries to spend as much time as possible with them.

Siti is the youngest daughter of a family from a disadvantaged financial background. Her parents have raised her and her siblings according to Malaysian cultural and religious values. She faced challenges when she applied to university as the first daughter of the family to continue education after graduating from school because her parents expected her to stay with them and not move out of the family home. However, Siti convinced her parents to allow her to continue her studies by emphasising that in Islam, education is an obligation and a fundamental right for all. She thus interprets her educational success as an indicator of religiosity. In addition, she feels that religion helps her to remain grounded among the various diverse values, norms and lifestyles to which she is exposed as a student and which she at times appear to find disorientating and difficult to cope with.

Siti said in the interview that she was aware that her educational success partially alienated her from her parents and their way of life. However, she does not want to turn

away from her family and considers her parents as important to and supportive of her education. It is apparent, then, that she regards education as a family project and not only as her own endeavour. Siti is able to maintain her bond to her parents because they share a sense of the importance of religion. This notwithstanding, her way of relating to religion differs slightly from her parents' perspective on Islam. Siti reflects thoroughly on religion and finds ways to justify her lifestyle by referring to religious values and rules which permit her the freedoms she claims. This strategy enables her to preserve intergenerational harmony. Her assumption of a degree of authority in the family on religious issues in consequence of her leadership role in a religious organisation has changed her relationship with her parents. Instead of considering Siti as their dependent daughter, they have begun to regard her more as an equal from whom they can learn. This development has also played a role in the shift in family structures she has initiated in favour of greater independence for her and her siblings.

6. Discussion

The case studies discussed here illuminate the lives of two Muslim female students in Malaysia from different and unequal socio-economic and familial backgrounds. However, both case studies feature characteristics shared across the sample. All interviews are demonstrative of the importance of education and educational success to both the young women and their parents. The daughters experience their parents as supportive of their education and are grateful for the opportunities they have received. Accordingly, they consider educational success not only as their own but as a success belonging to the family. It appears that educational success is not possible without parental support, and that parents are valued as a resource for their daughters' educational success and personal development. However, the young women's lives are changing rapidly, becoming more dynamic and diversified. Their exposure to international and pluralised surroundings on campus and their pursuit of individual life plans alienate them from their families, at least to a degree. This conflicts with the students' desire to maintain close ties to their parents and to preserve familial cohesion.

The interviews show that religion may serve as a link between the students and their parents and/or wider society. It keeps their connection to their families and their society strong while simultaneously enabling them to emancipate themselves from more so-called traditional, narrower roles. Sharifah views religion as tradition and considers herself not particularly religious. Nevertheless, it is only her adherence to the religious norms and values emphasised within Malaysian society that allows her to follow her own vision of a pluralised and internationalised life. Her principal focus is on the external religious symbolism and practices of daily life. Religion serves the additional purpose of helping her feel connected to her family when she is abroad. By contrast, Siti considers herself very religious and devotes her life to her faith. She extended her knowledge of Islam as a member of a religious organisation, and in the process became valued within her family as a person to consult on religious matters. As her religious understanding differs in some respects from that of her parents, she has been able to create a small shift in the family structures by focusing on interpretations that support emancipation and independence for her and her sisters.

Many current research studies exploring the lives of young Muslims have come to the conclusion that they experience the different spheres in their lives as contradictory. They appear ambitious, attempting to attain greater individualisation for themselves, while experiencing their parents' expectations as contrary to their own future plans. This study has shown that the Muslim female students interviewed do not perceive the different social environments they are exposed to as inconsistent. Further, the interviews indicate that in Malaysia, intergenerational relationships between parents and their daughters are highly dynamic. The young women have developed abilities that give them the opportunity to attain creative agency in their own lives while reconciling their own visions and the requirements of their families and society by partially re-interpreting and modifying the family structures within which they have been raised. In consequence, they initiate change and transformation within families, achieving greater autonomy for themselves and their siblings, precisely by keeping family ties strong and attaching substantial significance to intergenerational harmony.

7. Conclusion

The educational trajectories of the female students interviewed for this study point to specific interrelationships in Malaysia among the diversity categories of gender, religion and ability. Recent studies have shown that achieving gender equality remains a challenge for Malaysian society. Patriarchal structures and specific societal expectations regarding men and women are still prevalent in both families and society at large, and women's potential is limited as a consequence (see, for example, Endut *et al.* 2018, forthcoming). It thus appears that the diversity category of gender acts restrictively for these women. However, the interviews undertaken in this study show that the category may become less restraining in interrelation with the diversity categories of ability and religion. Both ability and religion serve as resources in the young women's pursuit of their hoped-for lifestyles and in the process of their individualisation.

Further qualitative research would be greatly beneficial in exploring intergenerational dynamics from the perspectives of both parents and their daughters. Longitudinal research designs would improve our understanding of how Muslim female students negotiate their lives in the long term and how they avoid or manage discrimination when they enter the Malaysian labour market.

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