

## Population Aging in Rural Malaysia: Its Barriers to Lifelong Education<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Population aging, a term used to refer to the continuous increasing of older population in a population structure, is becoming a global phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to describe the growth of older population and analyze its barriers to lifelong education programs in rural Malaysia. Utilizing data from a survey on 214 respondents aged 60 and above in rural areas in Malaysia, this study reveals that all of the older persons in the survey are categorized as from lower social economic status. In-depth interviews data shows that there are a lot of barriers to these older persons to be involved in lifelong education. These barriers include gender, education level, marital status, poverty, and health status. The government is facing problems to influence older persons to participate in the lifelong education programs in rural Malaysia.

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**Key words:** Population aging • Older person • Elderly • Lifelong education • Rural

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### INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the findings of a cross-sectional survey on population aging in rural Malaysia. In particular it examines barriers of population aging to lifelong education in rural Malaysia. Population aging, a term used to refer to the continuous increasing of older population or the growth of older population in a population structure, is becoming a global phenomenon. As projected by United Nations, very soon we will be living in an aging world. Today the older population will rise rapidly in most developed and many developing countries. This projected is primarily the result of reduced death rates at all ages in most developed and developing countries after World War II. The decline of death rates all over the world is due to various factors, among which is medical development. Medical development has resulted in an increase in life expectancy, and thus leading to the increasing in the number of older persons in the population structure. Population aging is a new phenomenon in developing countries. It is only in the 1980s, the problems of population aging have started to

be given world-wide attention by not only developed countries but also developing countries, and thus the 21st century will be characterized by the aging of the world population [1].

Currently, although developed countries have relatively high proportion of the older population, the older population in developing countries is growing at a faster rate. The absolute numbers of older population in developing countries are large and keep increasing [2]. Developing countries will become home to the largest proportion of the older person in the world in the near future. It is projected that there will be nearly one billion people aged 65 and above by the year 2025, of which 68 percent will be living in developing countries [2].

Since Malaysia gained independence some 50 years ago, the older population of Malaysia is growing. The median age of the population has increased markedly. In 1970, it was estimated that the older persons aged 65 years and above in Malaysia was 316,852 persons, and in 1991 the number has risen to 657 401 persons. In 2010 it was estimated that there were 1 340 000 persons aged 65 and above in Malaysia [3].

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Lifelong education in this study refers to the extension education intended to promote the welfare of the community members. It may also refer to the action programs conducted by government and community itself aims at improving the quality of life of the community members. These programs are created for the whole community, and are not exclusive for the older persons. The programs include sewing classes, cooking, making cakes, as well as Islamic education (informal religious classes).

Islamic education in Malaysia has grown over the years [4]. In fact, Islam has long been a significant component of Malay socio-political life and culture [5]. Thus several programs provided by the government through state Islamic Religious Departments amongst which include the running of informal religious classes in the mosques. The mosques management committees are consistently encouraged to organize activities which benefit the surrounding community to improve the quality of life. The increasing of older population will certainly bring challenges to lifelong education. This is particularly true because with many older persons in society, the program created for lifelong education will become problematic. Lifelong education is created with the objective of creating the awareness of the importance of social participation of community members in everyday life. This is certainly will be realized through programs as stated above. Most of older people, because of their limitation, frequently do not have a strong desire to participate in those programs created. As very soon we will be living in an aging world, lifelong education will be effected. In other words, population aging will become a major barrier to the lifelong education.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This paper is a product of a larger study conducted to explore the factors affecting the well-being of older persons in rural Malaysia. The original study has produced a number of papers related to older persons in rural Malaysia, and has been published elsewhere, including one more paper in this issue, related to family support of older persons in Malaysia.

That study has two main components; a quantitative study using a structured interview guideline, and a qualitative study using unstructured interviews with some selected key informants. Thus the study for this paper initially used a mixed method design, which was a combination of sociological method of face-to-face interviews, and the anthropological method of participant-

observation. The present paper reported information derived from unstructured interviews with some key informants in that study. This paper is particularly utilizes information gathered from key informants and observation on the involvement of older persons in the lifelong education. Population from which samples of the study were drawn, was older people aged 60 years and above. A total of 214 older populations, were selected as respondents using simple random sampling technique.

The average age is 68 years, while the oldest respondent is 95. 40% of the respondent is in 60-64 years category. The respondent currently married is 143, four divorced and 64 are widowed, and three respondents are never married. In the category never married, there are two male, and one female. Male respondents currently married outnumber female respondents (112 male compared to only 31 female respondents). The majority of male respondents still have spouse. The educational level is very low as all of the respondents are those who were brought up at the time before Malaysia gaining independence. The elderly woman who did not attend formal school is higher than the elderly man.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Barriers of the Lifelong Education in Rural Malaysia:**

Information from key informants shows that only a few older populations are involved in the programs created to increase the participants in lifelong education. Result reveals that the majority of the older population is not involved in lifelong education programs provided in the community except those related to the informal religious classes in the mosques. To get a detailed picture about this, several key informants are asked why, according to their opinion, the older person in their community is not involved in the programs. The involvement of older person in the lifelong education is very much related to many external factors. The involvement of the older person in the lifelong education can be influenced by factors, such as (1) gender; (2) education level; (3) marital status; (4) poverty; and (5) health status.

**Gender:** One of the distinct characteristics of population aging is gender differentials. Women are the majority of the elderly population in the vast majority of countries [6]. Although majority of the respondents in the survey are male, the majority of older population in the community are women. According to the key informants, older women are less interested in social activities. Rather,

older women are more interested to spend their spare time at home as caregivers, and engage in household activities.

The older women are also not interested to be involved in social activities because of religious factor. Although older women are also interested in daily religious activities [7], they are not encouraged to be involved in religious activities outside the home. Socio-culturally constructed gender relations in rural areas in Malaysia also has limited older women's opportunities to participate in social activities outside the domestic world, and thus causing the lifelong education not to be successful as expected.

**Education:** Education level is one more variable that can influence the involvement of the older persons in the lifelong education program. According to the key informants the education level influences the social attitudes, types of economic and social activities of the older people. Generally the higher the education level is, the more the tendency for the older person to participate in any social activities. The older persons with higher education are expected to be more active in social and economic life. The educational level of the respondents was very low; reflect the level of academic among the Malaysian as a whole before Malaysia gained independence in 1957. At that time not many people, especially in rural areas, has the opportunity to attend formal school [8]. The education facilities for these older persons were very poor resulting very small proportion of older people attending formal education. The percentage of older persons who do not attend formal school is higher result in lifelong education programs becomes less attractive. To these older persons, what is more important in their lives is activities that can directly offer them direct income. These circumstances have limited the respondents to be actively involved in lifelong education.

**Marital Status:** Findings from the survey reveal that the majority of older persons in the study area are currently married, but the widow or the widowers are also quite significant. In most population widowhood is normally higher among female than male aged [9]. This is also true in the survey area where widowhood is more common among the female older persons. Due to the differences in life expectancy and differences in age at first marriage between male and female spouses are some of the contributory factors causing higher proportion of widowhood among female older persons [9]. Women are also encouraged to marry men older than themselves

that increasing their chances of becoming widows [10]. In most cultures, widowers are encouraged to remarry, whilst widows are discouraged from doing so, or even stigmatized if the aged widows choose to remarry. Marital status affects many aspects of one's life. Marital status affects the likely to participate in social activities. The impacts of widowhood upon social activities are various. Previous research suggests the death of spouse constrains the social relationships of older persons [11] and they are more isolated. This situation is true in study area. According to key informants widows or widowers tend to not to be participated in any social activities, including in the lifelong education.

**Poverty:** Poverty is another barrier to the lifelong education in Malaysia. Poverty is common, not only in Malaysia, but also in South-East Asia as a whole. Over 70% of the poor in South-East Asia live in rural areas, and the number is even higher in Cambodia and Vietnam with almost all the poor (90%) live in rural areas [12]. Although in recent decades, the Asia and the Pacific has experienced rapid economic growth, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty is high. Asia-Pacific regions are home to two thirds of the world's poor, and it is estimated that around 70 percent of the region's poor lives and works in rural areas [12].

This survey was conducted in rural areas in Malaysia, where the majority of the populations are poor. Data gathered from survey in rural areas in these two countries also reveal that the majority of the respondents are poor. Although the level of poverty varies according to sex, age and socioeconomic status, the majority of the respondents are living under the official poverty line. Poverty can restrict them from actively involved in social activities. Some of the respondents admitted they do not have enough time to think about lifelong education. What is more important for them is activity that can generate income. They are willing to do whatever activities as long as they can generate income.

**Health Status:** At individual levels, as the process of aging advances, the older persons will experience declining capabilities in physical strength. The decline in some aspects of older persons' life such as health and economic conditions make the older person less active in social activities. Many of the older people choose to stay at home with their families. Health status of the older persons is affected by various factors such as his/her economic condition, being male or female, level of

education, marital status, working conditions, or lifestyle [10]. Health status is an important aspect to the life of older persons. It determined the level of social activities the older people can participate. According to the key informants, although most of the respondents demonstrate a good health status, the majority of them are having problems in their health conditions that forced them not to participate in the lifelong education programs. When compared to younger age group, older persons generally demonstrate lower health status because the function of human body will gradually diminish over time. Moreover, the older persons who feel they have problems in health status often feel that they had better stay at home rather than actively participate in the community activities.

### CONCLUSION

Result of the study reveals that the majority of the older population is not involved in lifelong education programs provided in the community. Through key informants the involvement of older person in the lifelong education is very much related to many external factors such as (1) gender; (2) education level; (3) marital status; (4) poverty; and (5) health status. Lifelong education in Malaysia, as in other developing countries, is considered as a luxury activity. Because of low level of education, the respondents did not have the opportunity to work in the government sectors. Being employed in the agricultural sector up to the very old age influences the use of their spare time socially. They start their works early in the morning, and will normally finish the work late in the evening. When they reach home, they feel very tired, and do not have the desire to be involved in any social activities. Thus, in the community where the majority of the population is older person, it is great barriers for the lifelong education programs to be succeeded.

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