

Factors Related to Religious Commitment of Rural Older Woman in Malaysia

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Abstract: The person aged 60 years and above is growing in Malaysia. Following the growing number of older persons, particularly for Muslim communities, issue of religious commitment has been an interesting issue to be discussed. The aim of this article is to explore the factors related to religious commitment of rural older woman in Felda Chiku, in district of Gua Musang, Kelantan, Malaysia. Using a convenience sampling technique, a total of 70 older residents aged 50 years and above in Felda Chiku was selected as respondents. Results reveal that almost all of older women have high level of religious commitment. Information from unstructured interviews with the respondents as well as with several informants found that five factors related to the high commitment of elderly women in religious commitment, which are age changes, religious environment, fear of rejected by community members, want to socialize and religious activities in study area.

Key words: Older person • Religious commitment • Elderly women • Religious activity

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion based upon surrender to the will of the One God or Allah and upon knowledge of His unity and Islam is nothing other than living according to the Will of Allah in order to gain peace in this world and felicity in the world to come [4]. Islam is not just a religion, but it is an *al-din*, or a way of life. A term *al-din* is used to be embracing all the facets of human life [4]. Thus, what we do, what we think, what we feel, what we want, what we plan to do, or everything is inside its domain, that are must be according to the Will of Allah. It is also to mean that all human beings have no other choice but worship, or submit themselves to Allah's Will. In the Qur'an Chapter Adh-Dhariyat (The Wind That Scatter) (51), verse 56, Allah says: "I have only created Jinns and men (human beings), that they may serve (worship) Me" [4].

Following the growing number of older persons, issue of religious commitment of older persons has become an interesting issue to be discussed. Islam places great emphasis on religious commitment of Muslim individuals. Islam deals with the life here on this earth and the life after death and Islam has become a way of life among the Malays in Malaysia. The aim of this article is

to explore the factors related to religious commitment of rural Malay older women in Malaysia. It is an extension of the results of a survey conducted at household level to examine the commitment of rural older women in religious activities with a special reference to rural older women in Felda Chiku, district of Gua Musang, Kelantan.

The world now is aging. The person aged 60 years and above is growing worldwide and it started to be an important agenda in developing countries in recent years. Although the size of older population has been growing for centuries, the number of the world's older persons has only increased dramatically since 1950. In 1950 there were only 205 million persons aged 60 years and older throughout the world. In 2000, this number has increased to about 606 million [7]. It is projected that there will be more than 1 billion people aged 60 years and above by the year 2025 and this figure will reach 2 billion by 2050 [8].

In 1990, 26 countries had older populations aged 65 years and above of at least 2 million and by 2000, 31 countries had reached the 2-million mark. Projection to year 2030 indicates more than 60 countries will have 2 million or more [2].

The population of Malaysia is also moving towards aging. There is clear evidence that it is starting to aging.

In 1970, it was estimated that the older persons aged 60 years and above in Malaysia accounted for about 539,118 persons and in 1991 the number has risen to 1 032 310 persons. This figure has increased further, where in 2010 it was estimated that there were 2 094 000 persons aged 60 and above in Malaysia [10].

As the number of older persons has increased, the communities will soon rich of older persons. For Muslims, religious practice should be considered as an important agenda in life. Islam is nothing other than living according to the Will of Allah in order to gain peace in this world and felicity in the world to come [4]. Therefore, older Muslim should gather good deeds as much as possible. It is at old age most of us see that we should think about death. Because of old age, much of what we can not do in the past, we can do them right now. But, in Islam, good deeds that we have done regularly and willingly are much more important, as narrated by 'Aisha that the Prophet Muhammad said "Do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately and know that your deeds will not make you enter Paradise and that the most beloved deed to Allah's is the most regular and constant even though it were little" [1].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study presents a result of a mixed method study of religious commitment of older persons living in community. At community level in Malaysia, religious teaching, or particularly Islamic education has grown over the years and places such as *surau*, mosque and *madrasah* have become important centres for teaching all aspects of the religion in the community [3]. In Islam, these places are considered as playing a very significant role. Their functions are not only limited as a place of worship, but also as a community centre for Islamic studies. One of the most important function of mosques, for instance is to become a centre of knowledge where religious educations are conducted after daily prayers, besides other activities to fulfill the spiritual needs of the Muslim community. Data used in this article was originally taken from a study of self-concept of older women at Felda Chiku, Kelantan [9]. This study has chosen 70 older residents aged 50 years and above in Felda Chiku, Kelantan through a convenience sampling as respondents. To explore the factors related to religious commitment of older rural women in Felda Chiku, this study has gathered quantitative data through face-to-face structured

interviews and qualitative data through unstructured interviews. All these data were analyzed through descriptive approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents for this study are living in Felda Chiku 1, one of the settlements developed by the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) in Kelantan, Malaysia. Felda is a land development institution established before Malaysia achieved independence, in 1956 [6]. The establishment of Felda was aims at developing rural areas with commercial oil palm or rubber plantations. It also aims at restructuring the rural poor so as the economic status of rural population can be improved. Felda Chiku 1 is located at Ulu Lebir, Kelantan, which is about 35 kilometers from the town of Gua Musang. This settlement is purposively chosen for the study because the community has a long tradition of religious education system. The number of respondents in this study is 70 persons, consists of older women aged 50 years and older living in Felda Chiku, Gua Musang, Kelantan, Malaysia, selected from the population of 150 women older persons. Respondents were chosen through simple random sampling. The age distribution of respondents is distributed between 50 to 85 years. Most of them aged between 51 to 61 years. The educational level of the population in Felda Chiku is quite low. This is due to the fact that these older persons are among the generation before Malaysia gained independence. For those who have formal education, the great majority of them have received education only at form 5 level or below.

Respondents who do not working are more than who reported working. The number of respondents who do not working is 45. Most of them do not working because they choose to become full-time housewives. Their income is very low. Most women reported they have an income of about RM1500 and below per month. Most of women have many children. There were also respondents who have more than 10 children.

Factor Related to Religious Commitment: In this survey, almost all respondents perceive them as high religious commitment; 63 respondents (90%) out of 70 elderly persons. The elderly women who perceive their religious commitment as moderate and low are not significant. There are various factors influence the level of religious commitment. To explore the factors related to religious

commitment of older rural women in Felda Chiku, this study has gathered qualitative data through in-depth interviews with several respondents. From these interviews, the research finds the following reasons: (1) age changes; (2) religious environment; (3) fear of rejected by community members; (4) want to socialize; and (5) religious activities in study area.

Age Changes: People will enter old age category when he or she reach the age of 60 years and above. Although most people in developing countries, like Malaysia will continue working during this age, most of older people find that at this age, the religion plays an important part of their lives. Normally age changes are an important factor in religious commitment of older persons. When a person becomes older, he/she usually becomes more aware of the religious responsibility. This is particularly true as all Muslims realize that life on this earth is temporary. All of human beings will one day meet Allah and it is their obligations to fulfill the religious responsibility. The study found age changes have been one of the factors why religious concerns among the respondents increase. Respondents see that they are now at their final stage of life. Most of respondents see their past mistakes and to redeem this, they now trying to intensify their religious practices. They want to use the remaining days given for religion so that they can die in a good ending. They know they will die sooner or later and thus they want to gather as much as possible good deeds to be used for the life after death. They want to dedicate their last years of their life to Allah.

Religious Environment: The religious environment is another factor why some of older persons are committed in religious activities. In fact, environment is one of the important contributor factor that shape human behavior. As Bandura [5] points out that human development reflects an interaction between the person, the person's behavior and the environment. Environment in this context is used to mean physical and social surroundings, particularly family and friends as well as other social influences. Thus, religious environment is quite important to influence our commitment on religious matter. Members of the community in study area realized the need to increase the level of religious commitment. They felt their religious commitment should be enhanced. Kelantan that has long been recognized as the state where Islamic aspects are of important agenda resulted the level of religious commitment of the elderly comprehensive. If

there are elderly who are a bit stray away from religion, as have not prayer, have never been to mosques, or not fasting in Ramadhan, for examples, are not accepted and will be isolated by community.

Fear of Rejected by Community Members: Element of shame and fear to be isolated and ridiculed by society has been an important factor why the religious commitment of the elderly in the study area considered good. Most of the people in Kelantan are considered as among the Muslims who have a high commitment in religious activities. In this case, the surrounding community can be an important element to attract other people to the religious activities. Element of shame and fear should be a culture in life. Although there are some older persons who are not interested in religious programs, because many older persons around have participated in various activities, produced a sense of shame among those elderly who do not wish to participate in the programs. This shame will eventually cause such elderly to be involved in the programs. This situation can eventually make them feel excited to be engaged in religious activities.

Want to Socialize: Want to socialize is one of the contributory factors to the level of religious commitment among older persons in the study area. In rural areas, those who reluctant to participate in any religious activities conducted at the community level will be rejected by the community members. There are also elderly woman who show their obedience to religion because they want to socialize with other elderly people. Although this sounds somewhat negative, it can give a positive impact on the development of Islamic teaching. By engaging in religious programs, the elderly has the opportunity to interact with peers. Although this was initially less suitable, but in the end, people are forced to adhere to the religion. Besides that older persons have to find any activities in every day life to maintain their well-being. The more activities we try to involve, the more active life will become. It makes an older person's life full and active. Older people who do not have any activities will be abandoned and can lead to serious illness. Considering this, many older women in study area choose to be actively participated in any social or religious activities.

Religious Activities in Study Area: This study was conducted in the state of Kelantan, situated in East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. There are a number of significant

differences between this state and other states in Malaysia. Demographically, most of its population is Malays, which is synonymous to Islam or Muslims. Politically, Kelantan has long been ruled by the opposition Islamic party, which is known as Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party, *PAS*. The *PAS* government in Kelantan in has long been emphasizing Islamic principles to be practically applied as a way of life in every aspects of daily life of its population. Thus, there are a variety of religious activities have been created to enhance the knowledge and practice of religion among the community members. These activities can serve as a mechanism that will prevent people from doing activities that are not beneficial. Many older people are looking for activities to fill their free time to avoid sitting and sleeping all the time at home. They do not have a lot of activities to do. One of the activities that are deemed appropriate is involved in religious activities. By engaging in these activities they may also feel they still needed by the community.

CONCLUSION

Issue of religious commitment among Muslim communities has been an interesting issue to be discussed. This is due to the fact that the Malays and Islam is inseparable. Islam is the force behind that shapes the behavior of most of the Malays in Malaysia. As Islam is nothing other than living according to the Will of Allah in order to gain peace in this world and felicity in the world to come, religious practice should be considered as an important agenda in life. Older Muslim should gather good deeds as much as possible. Results of this research reveal that almost all of older women have high level of religious commitment. Their religious commitment is related to many factors. Information from unstructured interviews with respondents as well as with several informants found five factors related to the high commitment of elderly women in religious commitment, which are age changes, religious environment, fear of rejected by community members, want to socialize and religious activities in study area. All of these reasons are discussed in this paper.

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