Religious Commitment of Rural Older Woman in Malaysia

W.A. Wan-Ibrahim and I. Zainab

1School of Social Development, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia
2Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: Following the growing number of older persons in the world, research on aging and the older persons have become the focus of extensive concern, resulted in a growing number of researches on these issues. Malaysia is no exception. Following the growing number of older persons in Malaysia recently, issue of religious commitment of older persons has been an interesting issue to be discussed. The level of religious commitment of older persons varies considerably between older persons. The aim of this article is to explore religious commitment of older people with a special reference to the rural older women in Felda Chiku, the district of Gua Musang, Kelantan, Malaysia. Using a non-probability sampling technique, a total of 70 older residents aged 50 years and above in Felda Chiku 1, Kelantan were selected as respondent. Results of the study show that almost all of older women have high level of religious commitment. Older women who have moderate and low levels of religious commitment are not significant. The implications of these findings are that religious programs should be activated so as all older persons have the awareness to comply with religion in every day life.

Key words: Religious • Demographic • Older population • Rural society • Aging society

INTRODUCTION

One of the most distinct demographic phenomena in the last century has been population aging. Before the twentieth century this phenomenon was not quite dramatic. Following the process of population aging that has been taken place in most of the societies, the number and proportion of older persons become a larger share of the population structure. Life expectancy, the average expected number of years a person can live calculated from birth to death, has increased considerably. Generally, life expectancy of female population exceeding male is about five years or more and thus in the vast majority of countries of the world, because of their longer life expectancy, older women make up the majority of older population [1, 2].

In recent years, population aging has become a major concern facing the entire world. The demographic transition that has taken place in most of European countries in the eighteenth century has started to become a distinct feature in some of developing countries. Many of the developing countries has started to enter the third stage of the demographic transition, resulting the fertility rates begin to decline along with mortality rates and thus the proportion of the elderly population begins to increase. The improvement in life styles couple with the development in medical technology promotes the prolongation of life of the majority of the population all over the world. Because of that life expectancy of the majority of the population has become higher than before. For instance, prior to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, life expectancy at birth of the population was hardly exceeded 30 or 40 years. Nowadays, this group of population would be not significant in number. The norm of life expectancy at birth everywhere has been 60 years and over depending on the level of economic development of the country.

Population aging is essentially a new concern for policy makers in developing countries. As the number and percentage of the world’s older population continues to increase, issues regarding older persons in society are becoming increasingly important in the agenda of...
developing countries. The issue with regards the older persons has attracted attention from many researchers and scholars. Indeed, research on population aging is primarily also a new development in Malaysia. In just about three decades or so since the older persons receive attention in Malaysia, many of the issues of this category of population have been the target of research at the university level. Many scholars strive to seize the opportunity to explore issues that are new. This research is conducted to highlight issue of religious commitment of older persons in rural Malaysia. Research in this issue is felt necessary because the practice of religious commitment is particularly important to those who reach older age. Although at old age, older persons have to continue to worship Allah, doing good deeds and avoiding bad deeds. In the Qur’an Chapter Adh-Dhariyat (The Wind That Sctter) (51), verse 56, Allah says: “I have only created Jinns and men (human beings), that they may serve (worship) Me” [3]. Worship is to obey Allah completely, do what He asks and keep away from what He hates and doing any good deed and/or avoiding a bad deed are among the actions of worship.

Although up to the present day a population aged 65 and over in Malaysia is still small and Malaysia is still not yet categorized as aging society, the amount and percentage is increasing. There are signs that Malaysia is heading towards aging [4]. In 1970 the population aged 65 and over in Malaysia was 316,852 people and it increased to 788,000 in 1995. In terms of percentage, it rose from 3.1% (1970), to 3.9% (1995) and increased further to 4.2% (2000) and is expected to reach 7.3% in 2020 [5]. Based on this, in 2020 the population aged 65 and over in Malaysia will be amounting 7.3%. United Nations [6] categorizes a country as an aging society when the population aged 65 and over in the country amounting seven percent or more. Malaysia is expected to have 7.3% of older population aged 65 and over and therefore will get the status of aging society in 2020.

Despite a large number of studies to explore certain aspects of older persons, the nature of religious commitment of older persons is still relatively unexamined. Very sparse information is available about the nature of religious commitment of older population. This is, among other things, because research on religious amongst older persons is still to be developed. Many questions about the religious commitment of this population in Malaysia remain unanswered. In an attempt to fill the gap, this paper therefore aims at analyzing the religious commitment of rural older persons in rural Malaysia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Area for this study is 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 [7]. 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 purporsively chosen for the study because the community has a long tradition of religious education system. Data used in this article was originally taken from a study of self-concept of older woman at Felda Chiku, Gua Musang, Kelantan [8]. This study examines to what extent the sociodemographic and economic factors have relationships with self-concept of woman older persons in Felda Chiku 1. This study used a mixed method design that uses a combination of two basic designs, quantitative and qualitative.

Using a non-probability sampling technique, a total of 70 older residents aged 50 years and above in Felda Chiku 1, Kelantan were selected as respondents. These respondents are those participating in quantitative study and also participating in qualitative as well. Quantitative data was gathered through face-to-face interviews, while qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews, information from key informants and field observation. Data for quantitative analysis was collected during 90-minutes structured interviews conducted in respondents home by four interviewers. The interview schedule, containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions, covered a wide range of questions regarding demographic, socio-economic, marriage and family background, health and living arrangement. From the study, a wide range of data has been collected and relevant to this paper are variables related to the religious participation. To get information on the religious participation, respondents were asked several closed-ended questions regarding to their religious activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Respondents: The target population of the present study consists of older women aged 50 years and older living in Felda Chiku, Gua Musang, Kelantan,
Malaysia. Women chosen as participants for this study because in Kelantan in particular, women dominate many sectors, particularly related to small business sectors [9]. The number of older persons in this study is 70 persons, selected from the population of 150 women older persons. Respondents were chosen through simple random sampling. A sampling frame was designed to give equal opportunities to all members of women older population in Felda Chiku, Gua Musang, Kelantan to be chosen as respondent of the study. Data collected analyzed descriptively.

The age distribution of respondents is distributed between 50 to 85 years. It should be noted that all the female respondents are in the age of 50 years and older since women aged below 50 years in the study area were not categorized as older persons and therefore disqualified from the study. Most of them aged between 51 to 61 years. In terms of educational level, the educational level of the population in Felda Chiku, is quite low. For those who have formal education, the great majority of respondents have received education only at form 5 level or below. The modal level of education was form 5 level. The level of education of respondents reflects poor facilities of national education system in Malaysia in the past several decades.

The occupational status is another aspect worth noting. Respondents who do not work are more than who reported working. The number of respondents who do not work is 45. They reported do not working because they choose to become full-time housewives. Their income depends on the income of their husbands. Cost of living in rural areas that do not require large expenditures become a reason why most of them do not working. Furthermore, many of their daily needs they can get for free. Some of them also grow salads, vegetables, or potatoes, which can be used for daily needs. Most of older women have many children. They have between 5 to 9 children. There were also respondents who have children more than 10. The number of children the respondents have is significantly related to their social classes. The lower class respondents tend to have more children. Besides that in rural areas children is particularly important as a source of security in old age. As the rural population has no regular income, they tend to rely on their children for old age security when the time comes they are no longer able to do any work.

Their incomes are generally low and most of them are poor. The income of Felda settlers is not much different with other settlers. Except for those who were doing the extra work, most of them have similar income. Most women reported they have an income of about RM1500 and below per month. While there are those earning more than RM3000, the number of respondents with such income is not significant. This income is sufficient for their daily needs. Many of the respondents grow vegetables to increase their income.

**Religious Commitment:** To measure the level of religious commitment of women older persons in this study, they are asked a question directly related to their perception of the level of their religious commitment, which is “in general how is the level of your religious commitment lately. Please indicate whether: (1) strongly not compliance, (2) not compliance, (3) compliance and not compliance equally, (4) compliance and (5) strongly compliance. In the analysis, respondents with response (1) and (2) are categorized as having low levels of religious commitment, while respondents who answered (3) are classified as having low levels of religious commitment, while respondents who answered (3) are classified as having moderate level of commitment and respondents preferred (4) and (5) will be included as high religious commitment. Surprisingly enough, in this survey, as Table 1 reveals almost all respondents perceive them as those have high religious commitment, and these amounting 63 respondents (90%) out of 70 elderly. The elderly women who perceive their religious commitment as moderate and low are not significant.

This result is not an unusual one in the context of the rural society in Malaysia. The religious commitment of rural population, especially the elderly, can be proud of. It has been generally accepted that the older persons will soon be facing their own death. They, as all lives on the earth surface, someday must die. For them, death is a part of life that every body has to experience it. Their beliefs are that this life is temporary; they will die one day to meet Allah, The Creator. They aware that not only that they come from Allah, but also they are finally returns to Him. Thus, they as far as possible are eager to increase their religious commitment as a coping mechanism to deal with death. They are all understood that death is an inevitable event. It is can not be avoided and death is sure to happen. Thus, they want to gather as much reward as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Commitment</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
they can to prepare for the death during their remaining years. Observations on the way of life of other people in the study area also found that most of them can be considered as compliance to the religion. They are all have a high level of religious commitment. Not many rural populations, let alone women, for instance, who are not prayer and not fasting in Ramadhan. They are also easy to donate if requested. They rarely broke religion act and feel they should compliance to their religion. This is, among other things, because of the close tie they have with religion or with cultural norms in Kelantan since decades ago. Besides that for all human life, their social behaviour is most strongly depends on cultural norms formed in the past [10].

It is also obvious the socio-cultural or activity of everyday life of the people in Kelantan in general, or in study area in particular, is very much guided by Islamic values. At the state level, endeavours in implementing Islamic values in every state program are increasing. The state of Kelantan, since decades ago, is being ruled by Islamic party (PAS) which attempt to implement the state development programs based on Islamic values. The PAS-led government is using every opportunity to create Islamic atmosphere to the people in Kelantan. This situation shapes the way of life of the people in Kelantan and is seen to have great influences the level of the religious commitment of most of the respondent.

CONCLUSION

Following the growing number of older persons in most parts of the world, research on aging and the older persons have become the focus of extensive concern. In Malaysia since older persons has received a special attention in 1980s, many issues regarding older persons has been documented. Moreover, following the growing number of older persons in Malaysia in recent years, issue of religious commitment of older persons has also been an interesting issue to be discussed. It was found that the level of religious commitment of older persons varies between older persons. Results of the study reveal that almost all older women have high level of religious commitment. Older women who have moderate and low levels of religious commitment are not significant. Indeed, the level of religious commitment of older women in study area is impressive. Their religious commitment, as reported, is related to many backgrounds. Some of these backgrounds are discussed in this paper. The implications of these findings are that religious programs should be activated so that all older persons have the awareness to comply with religion in their every day lives.

REFERENCES