



The Position of Women in Brunei: Both in Private and Public Spheres

Farhana Haque

PhD Research Fellow Academy of Brunei Studies University of Brunei Darussalam Jalan Tungku, BE1410, Brunei

Darussalam

Email: dhak_121@yahoo.com

Article History

Received: April 8, 2020

Revised: May 1, 2020

Accepted: May 10, 2020

Published: May 13, 2020

Abstract

Women are the true contributors for both at home and the society. In the private sector they have various types of roles such as daughter, wife and mother. First of all as a daughter women fulfill their duties for not asking money from their parents when they start to work and respect the elders at home. Additionally when they are financially independent they involve themselves in financial matters such as house expenses. As a wife, women's duties are different, they are then loyal to care their husbands and children. "bear him children, look after the family, maintain her modesty as well as guard her sexuality and faithfulness". [Roziyah and Azizah \(2003\)](#). Most of the young families now share their income between family and themselves, such as electricity bills, water bills, telephone bills, kitchen expenses, car loan, etc. Both the husband and wife work together to uplift their household and try hard to provide the necessary things to their children. In the public sphere, as an employee women are punctual, honest and loyal like other male members of the office.

Keywords: Bruneian women; Family; School; Home; Society; Adat; Past and present time.

1. Introduction

Women's contributions in both the private and public spheres gives women a certain amount of power and authority in the family as they have more pull off power in financial issues. Though according to the culture of society the final decision belongs to the breadwinner, the man of the family, and everyone still holding this belief. To grab a respectable position in the society everyone is attentive. Especially when it's about women then it indicates that as an individual entity women compete for status because it enhance their respect and fame. To some extent it gives them fair amount of power in front of men. Although it is to be notated that the power of women may not be welcomed by all in the society. Status refers to "the position or positions a person or group holds in the structure of a society-in its educational institution, the occupational structure, its political system, in the family, and so on" ([Pietila and Jeanne, 1990](#)).

This also discloses one's status in the social classification and is "determined by wealth, education, hereditary caste, occupation, marital status or by some other agreed criterion or, by some combination of criteria". [Roziyah and Azizah \(2003\)](#). In a conventional way, men are the one who gets more power, prestige and privileges than women. Hence globally, more fame, recognition and appreciation is given to men and also to their work. In society it is widely believed that men are the breadwinner and decision maker at home and outside of home. For instance men are occupying the high position in the employment while women are playing the most unimportant and unknown roles in the private domain.

In today's world, we can say that men are not the only existence in society who are enjoying almost every types of facilities in greater way than women. It was like this in the past, because at the present time, I believe that men needs to compete with women especially in the areas of education, employment, positions, promotions etc. Furthermore, the young generations have different aspirations compared to older generation. While the older generation took pride in their role as housewives and home-maker, most of the younger generations are more ambitious with dreams of achieving white-collar jobs with huge salary outside the domestic sphere. They now compete with men as they are more educated, risk-taker and independent. Therefore, we do see a number of women in Brunei who holds higher positions in the employment sector, and this had indirectly contributed to their rise up the social and occupational position, for example, in the 1990s two women had been appointed as the Permanent Secretary; Datin Paduka Dyg Hajah Azizah Penglima Asgar Dato Paduka Hj Abdullah and Datin Hj. Misli bte Hj. Awang, and according to the [Borneo Bulletin Brunei Yearbook: Key Information on Brunei \(2004\)](#), currently there are also another two women who are at the Deputy Permanent Secretary level for the Ministry of Education; Datin Paduka Dyg Hajah Jahrah binti Haji Mohamad and Pengiran Datin Paduka Hajah Mariam binti Pengiran Haji Matarsat" ([Borneo Bulletin Brunei Yearbook: Key Information on Brunei, 2004](#)).

According to society it is unavoidable that women have always been considered as lower than men. Sadly they are regarded as the weaker sex and believed that they can't accomplish some certain tasks in both the prehistoric and contemporary time. Even this stereotypical idea about women can be seen in movies where we can see them playing a role the dependent and emotional heroin. These roles are further highlighted through the mass media and its result came out as the stereotyped gender roles according to their biological roles. In real life this kind of stereotyped

gender roles happening in women's daily lives in terms of education, employment, job promotions, the benefits in housing, wages system and the sector of scale. As for English schools, there were 2 English primary schools that initiated the extension of education to secondary levels and by 1959 there were at least 10 English schools throughout Brunei and out of these 5 schools had offered introducing secondary levels while another 3 were government schools, specific numbers on the female students was not available.

“And though the young generation are more competitive and does not relate themselves according to the stereotypical role attached to them, the on-going discrimination still perpetuates the existence of a large gap between the status of men and women. This is especially so, in patriarchal countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Arabian countries, etc., and though there are a number of women who managed to break away from the ‘traditional stereotyping’ and reach a high status through hard work. Unfortunately, patriarchy still persists” (Abdullah *et al.*, 2004/2005).

2. Family Background of Bruneian Women

Like most of the Southeast Asian countries, family background plays the vital roles than other achieved position of Bruneian women. Ascribed positions are more important than meritocracy achievements. It remains as a social reality that ascribed positions remnants influential in identifying one's chances of being employed, getting promotion etc. It is the legacy through birth or the ‘title’ attached to them for carrying significant value in influencing their positions.

“And in Brunei, individuals with titles such as Pehin, Dato, Datin Paduka, Pengrin, Awangku, Dayangku, are looked up upon, by majority of the people. It is undeniable that meritocracy has to a large extent increased in its importance; unfortunately ascribed status still has its place among the society. And though women are making more attempts to break away from the typical stereotyped roles attached to them, they continue to struggle in some areas. The rising participation of girls in schools happening because of the parents' realization and out of the sense of importance about education for their daughters. Furthermore the rigorousness of the Japanese may have infused nationalistic feelings among the locals. And after remembering about war many realizes the significance girls education as they cannot always depends on their husbands and other male members in their family.

3. The Position of Bruneian Women in Front of men throughout the Past and Present Time

A number of literature and articles depicted that majority of women in Southeast Asia enjoyed high position. For instance, an article about Brunei proclaimed that “women seem to have often managed to boss, nag, and otherwise influence their husbands” (Kimball, 1980). Although women relish the higher position in some aspects of life but still it's the men who are occupying the ultimate power, “an individual's ethnic identity is determined quite simple by that of the father” (Kimball, 1980). This above statement by Kimball, Linda A proved that men are holding the extreme power and usually they have “wives often exceeded four and concubines were rather more”. Kimball (1980), thus we can know about the immorality of men and their pride of being powerful over women are immense.

However, in the past the status of women were very low and precisely that was invisible. It was the men who dictated women in every aspects of their life. As if it is the wives who are only responsible to care for husbands and children at home. This struggle of women have been visible in the earlier times when women tried to work harder in the private domains compared to their husbands. For example, a Western observer disclosed a Brunei man's statement as he remarked, “with an air of pride that his three wives all worked, and that therefore he was not yet reduced to the necessity of working” (Blundell, 1923).

Women are taught to be the only caretaker of family from the beginning of their existence because the society represents most women to juggle their time between supporting husbands, doing household chores, taking care of children, agricultural work, and office work as well as to attend the literacy classes and so on. All these tasks may be burdensome to them but they actually learned to sacrifice themselves for family and informed to cope up with it. Luckily, there is a noticeable improvement in women's position in the contemporary Brunei, For example, some wives get the scope to stay at home as housewives while their husbands provides them foods, shelter and gives them a proportion of their salary in every months for their personal spending. Also those husbands allows them to decide what to buy for themselves and for the house, such as foods, cloths, furniture etc. Moreover, as those women stay at home but they get engaged in some kinds of small business such as baking cakes, sewing cloths, opening small stalls for selling various types of foods for extra income. “... not only do they exercise an important influence on the control of the family finances, commonly acting as bankers for their husbands, but they also engage in independent enterprises which increase the family supply of cash...” (Raja and Raja, 1991). These types of wives in a family is the symbol who is upholding the certain power over the family's economic condition. Although it is to be noted that, this improvement didn't create the actual parity between men and women. But according to history we can realize that women's lives are far better compared to the past status of Bruneian women. From society men's domination over women can't be eliminated completely but it has to be maintain in a balanced way between the two genders.

4. Acquiring the Rights of Bruneian Women According to Tradition and Needs

Like other women from the Southeast Asia, Bruneian women are also stuck between traditions and needs to grab the demands of the current environment. From history we can see the women of older generation were more

patient, loyal and welcoming compared to the younger generation who are quite rebellious, and rush to gain their own way without caring the norms and values of the society. In spite of the culture and tradition which refers to the identity and behavior of Bruneian women, most of the younger generation actually compromise and bear it by obeying to the important values. For instance, to show respect to the elder ones and the religion. And possibly because of the disobedient nature by some of the younger ones, some of the older generation declared that they were better when they were younger. This type of thoughts came in to their mind because of their conforming attitude which reflects the perfect values of being a woman. Therefore, the main thing of uplifting the norms and values are basically learned from the young age to both the men and women's lives and they are thus defined by culture and values.

5. Women's Status in the Domain of School

When women get chance to attain education, attentions are appointed more to men. As well as most of the families do not allow their female members to attend school for various reasons. But luckily when one does attend school, women are advised to take up certain gender-stereotyped subjects such as home science, handicraft, sewing, cooking and then later they are expected to take up some other gendered occupation such as clerk, secretary, nurses, waitress, tailor etc. Hence, in the history of Bruneian women there are some cases where some families were completely denied their daughters to receive any kind of education and therefore most women by 1929 or even 1950s were totally illiterate. The government during that time was trying to minimize illiteracy in the society. Authorities paid numerous visit to various women's house for persuading their parents to send them school. Even they were sent warning letters repeatedly by the school and requesting those parents to agree. But all attempts failed to change their parents mind. Instead they were again asked to do household works and sadly by the age of 7 girls were trained to fetch water from the well, search for woods in the forest, washing dishes and cloths. Additionally the elder girls in a family used to help by cycling their younger brothers to school. Facetiously, they were not allowed to attend schools and functions such as weddings in the village but allowed to go to the forest alone to search for woods and fetch water for their house. Furthermore, in the traditional societies there were even some cases where women wish help to their brothers to attain school but even they take the second place in front of men. This has actually lowered the chance to be educated for girls and they are accepted to spend more time at home and helping out family. For this reason women are getting less emphasis on their education.

6. Women's Status in the Areas of Marriage System and Education

Like Malay tradition of marriage, arranged marriage is the only way to settle marriage for women. Their family should find a partner for them and tried to engage themselves by 9 to a person she never know or meet personally. And when a woman went for her study in abroad she denied to marry that chosen one by family. As a result when any woman got divorced they she had to face the stigma. If any woman's husband passed way, that woman are advised to take care of her family and make sure all of her children are getting the basic rights properly. According to the case study by Abdullah, Safwan, Teo, Muhd bte Farahiyah, Selina, (Student of UBD B. A program), presented about one old woman who wanted to remain anonymous and only known as 'nenek' "said that a woman will always be a woman, no matter how high your education and employment potential is; a woman will always end up at home. It is simply because women's place is at home in the past and it will stay like that forever, that is only natural. However, she admitted that though education was not important for them during their time, it is very essential for the present younger generation. She said that in the past, they get away with a job without education because back then the needs of the people was simple and basic, the economy was low, and less was demanded out of them, therefore they can easily secure a job for themselves. Now there is a high demand for employees with education, computer literate and bilingual, therefore, women have to compete against men for available posts, and there are salary scale attached to different level of education, the higher one's education is, the higher their salary scale and potential for promotion. Therefore, unlike families during their time where farming and cattle rearing were more important to earn a living, present families do realize the need to send their children, sons or daughters, to school and educate them" (Abdullah *et al.*, 2004/2005).

7. Contributions of Women for their Family in Brunei

In Brunei, men also know and in the previous time, specifically in 1960s, women in the rural areas were more active than men. The mothers of a family used to do lots of work than the fathers. Fathers were busy in searching for money during the day till late evening when the mothers had to walk all of their children to school. Besides this, they had to work in the field, bake cakes to sell in the market, wash cloths and prepare meals for their family. The transportation system was not so updated which was one of the major drawbacks for mothers to let their girls to go to school. Traditionally it's a belief in society that girls need to be given extra care as they are in danger for the event of rape. As a result until now some conservative families sanction curfews for their daughters but not their sons. But now a days with the improved transportation system parents are more encouraged to let their daughters' study, work in the outside. Now in Brunei we can see more women are occupying the places both in educational and employment fields. As it is a common scenario of society that, women should be under the dominance of men but despite of this hindrance women are proving themselves as the significant members in society and at home. However, in Bruneian society, most will argue that it is already the tradition to handover men as the leader of everything as long as they are capable of handling every types of works bravely and successfully. "A woman is an important thing... she bears a child, then takes a hoe, goes to the field and is working there; she feeds the child there... what work can a man do? A man can only buy palm oil. Men only build houses... Important things are women. Men are little. What are the things

of men? Men are nothing, have you not seen?” (Wazir, 1995). However, with the entrance of modernization and the realization of the significance of women’s contribution to the country, lots of worthwhile changes happened in Brunei since the 20th century. The experience of women in Brunei especially the scenario of younger generation changed. Now Brunei is witnessing more efforts by the government and some organizations to improve the condition of women in the society and encouraged them with education and opening up scope for women to join in the public workforce which basically contributed to the growth of the civil service. Government of Brunei also giving efforts to change the typical mentality and realization of women as women became more active in socio-economic domain. Though still there are certain types of discrimination against women in the society. Women of Brunei are no longer keep the aspiration to become a housewife rather they are interested to be more ambitious, competitive and open-minded in front of men. With the higher education they want to secure a bright future. The young generation wants to postpone marriages for achieving their career. Because they do not believe that their place should be at home only, therefore they deny to be dependent on men fully and getting involved in their education and career in a greater way.

8. What is Adat Brunei?

Adat means the “custom and tradition which include accepted ways of doing things by the Malays” (RoZIAH and Azizah, 2003). Adat is the custom or tradition to bring the shape in Bruneian society. Brunei is known as a highly conventional country with rich tradition and strong Islamic values. According to the history of Brunei, modernization has been blended and adopted into the local culture through language, educational system and the administration of the government and some sorts of entertainment. Regardless the influence of foreign culture, Brunei is still maintaining its own culture and traditional values. Because the government of Brunei wants to remain different from other developing countries by upholding their own culture, tradition, customs, values and religion. This makes Brunei and its society as the unique one. In the structure of Bruneian society or the Malay society there is a very narrow line between adat and Islamic values because both are integrated into society’s way of life. As we know women’s role can’t be different both at home and outside of the home from the religious perspectives in Southeast Asian countries. “Women’s social and domestic roles are not isolated from the religious institutions in Southeast Asia. Religious attitudes and law may affect women’s rights within marriage, their reproductive freedom, and even the domestic duties they perform”. (Penny, 1996).

Bruneian strongly believe to live their lives according to the teaching of Islam. So their adat became more strengthened with the etiquette of the countries national ideology Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) that emphasize the belief and obedience towards ALLAH (GOD), then loyalty towards Sultan and the country give significance to the Malay language to maintain the identity of Brunei. Adat also control the attitudes of the member of the society. For the majority of Malay women in Brunei there are some dress code, such as it can be seen that most of the Malay women always wear hijab (Muslim code of dressing) especially when seen in public areas, norms of talking, table manners etc. The Muslim code of dressing refers to “the shape of the selendang (long veil) and baju kurung (a long blouse worn over a sarong)” (Wazir, 1995).

Adat also fortify the appropriate behavior of women through the term femininity which is the symbol of modesty in Bruneian culture. A women of Brunei is advised to be humble, shy and hardworking who can able to take care of the family. But here also the stereotyped gender role is occupying its own nature with an image of woman who will be the ideal wife. Hence that ideal wife means she has to know cooking cleaning how to be patient and how to take good care of husband and children. No matter how much educated they are, eventually they end up with the gendered roles at home. Women are the one who performs the duties as the submissive existence while men are known as authoritative figure. In Islam, it is to be declared that men and women both are equal but the roles of women are different compared to men. Based on this idea most of the people misinterpret women’s role and promote the notion of inequality between men and women. Though many women see themselves not as exploited or unequal. They actually sees this as a ‘natural place’ for women to be and according to adat and religion. In some manners, the condition of women in Brunei is same like the women in Malaysia as Malaysian “ educated, urban, married Malay women still holds strongly to her as the dutiful wife and mother despite the fact that she is educated, financially independent and holds important position in the public domain”. Raja and Raja (1991)

As a whole it is to be noticed that, adat got the enormous impact in forming women as it have the continuance about the different gender roles among the society. Not only the Adat Melayu and Brunei adat are responsible for shaping Bruneian women but also the family, state and mass media playing their roles in shaping women and continuing adat.

9. Education System of Bruneian Women

Education is now the medium to eliminate ignorance and boost the expansion of knowledge. In modern societies it is mandatory to provide equal rights in education for both men and women as it is known as the fundamental elements for a country and its society to progress and grow more strongly. Without education, a country would not able to survive with the daily challenges of globalization. Proper educational system can influence the whole society and can be demonstrated through some factors such as the literacy and educational areas, employment and unemployment rates crime levels etc.

Unluckily, there are some countries that allow the stereotyped education system where boys should be given more attention than the girls. Boys are frequently being inspired to participate in class activities but depriving girls from those activities. By doing so these certain societies are snatching basic right to get proper education from girls and it affects their available opportunities for employment and the chances of getting desirable jobs also getting less. But to ensure this right for both the boys and girls is important for the socio-economic development and also for the

development of a country. It is honest to say that education is one of the aspects used by the government to transfer old culture and tradition to the younger generation for maintaining it. In Brunei two important courses have been included such as Civic course and MIB to the education system to meet the purpose of educating the inhabitants about the significance of Brunei's culture, tradition and monarchy.

10. Conclusion

Traditionally as we know men are considered to be more respectable in society as they do handle the responsibility of the family while on the other hands women are regarded as submissive and responsible for the household tasks, taking care of their husbands, children, parents, siblings and others to obey the rules that men are the breadwinner of every households and more supreme among women in the society as well as at home.

As discussed earlier, although there are some women who resisted themselves from obeying men in every aspects of life but majority of them had generally accepted it as their way of life. As a result, through this acceptance men's dominance got indirectly gave chance to the majority of women being self-satisfied both in the private and public domain. From historical perspective, the majority of Bruneian women were restricted within the domestic sphere mostly as housewives. And after spending most of the time at home they started to believe that this place is suitable for them. Women are taught to be stereotyped as " ' feminine' and sexually accommodating, as mothers, home-makers, food processors and keepers of communal and ritual relations; men as ' masculine' and sexually aggressive, as fathers, hunters, economic providers and guardians of political and religious institutions" (Wazir, 1995). Consequently, women became like the caretaker of the house as they spend most of their valuable time ensuring that all types of household chores got perfectly done. They are also active in agricultural works such as tending fields, looking after the farm, wood hunting in the forest and as well as looking after the children. In other others, it is almost confirm that women were not encouraged to work like men in public sectors. Facetiously, a number of research declared that, the older generations accepted that type of struggle and entirely happy with their condition at home. But unfortunately women's immense contribution to the economic sector by working on fields and accomplishing different types of unpaid labor often goes unremarkable. Their contribution and significance are frequently belittled and seen as invisible in front of men's tasks.

References

- Abdullah, S., Teo, M. and bte Farahiyah, S. (2004/2005). *Changing perspectives of women in brunei darussalam since 1929: Modern education and employment*. Bachelor dissertation.
- Blundell, P. (1923). *The city of many water, j.W.*: Arrowsmith: London. 105.
- Borneo Bulletin Brunei Yearbook: Key Information on Brunei (2004). *Forward media sdn bhd and brunei*. Press Sdn Bhd: Brunei Darussalam. 41.
- Kimball, L. A. (1980). *Women of brunei, in a world of women: Anthropological studies of women in the societies of the world*. J.F. Bergin Publishers. 44.
- Penny, V. E. (1996). *Women of southeast asia, center for southeast asian studies*. Illinois University. 4.
- Pietila, H. and Jeanne, V. (1990). *Making women matter: The role of the united nations*. Zed Books: London. 120.
- Raja, R. and Raja, M. (1991). *The role and status of malay women in malaysia: Social and legal perspectives*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka: Kemeterian Pendidikan Malaysia. 14.
- Roziah, O. and Azizah, H. (2003). *Women in malaysia: Breaking boundaries*. Utusan Publications and Distributions: Kuala Lumpur. 122.
- Wazir, J. K. (1995). *Male' and 'female' in developing sea*. Berg Publishers: Oxford, UK. 36.