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## Islam and Polygamy: A Case Study in Malaysia

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### Abstract

The mostly Muslim nation of Malaysia has always walked a fine line between protecting the rights of Malay women and acknowledging the role that Islam plays in the daily lives of its citizens. Yet many of the obstacles facing Malaysian society disproportionately affect women – mentioning one is polygamy. Can polygamy be questioned in Islam? Are there possibilities to restrict or ban polygamy in Muslim societies? This paper therefore engages in analyzing the perception of university students on the above issue.

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### 1. Introduction

Malaysia is among several Muslim countries sharing the history of Islamic resurgence. Organizations bearing the standard of Islamic revival have been gaining approval nationwide, and the impact they have had is particularly evident at a socio-political level (Othman, 2006). The Islamic revival in Malaysia has been defined by what is known as the *dakwah* movements which is often perceived in opposition to the economic, political, and social supremacy of their Western counterparts (Nagata, 1984; Narli, 1991). The phenomenon has also been defined as a symbol of the difference between the traditional and the Western (Karim, 1992). Women, as the bearers of cultural values and traditions, are important symbols in the politics of Islamic revivalism and Islamic state policy (Moghadam, 1994). The *dakwah* movement also opposed Western values, the sexual objectification of women and the Occidental brand of feminism. As such, the veil became an important symbol in the efforts of the Malay female community in establishing their Muslim identity, and the act of unveiling became associated with the West. This is why a majority of working professional women still wear the veil, as visible declarations of their commitment to Islam.

In addition to veiling and women's limited role as mothers and wives, *dakwah* also propagates the practice of polygamy. The debate about polygamy in Malaysia can be traced to the 1980s Islamic revivalist movements throughout the Muslim world that give rise to political Islam and pose severe challenges to women's rights activists involved in the push for democracy and respect for human rights, particularly Muslim women's rights. As such Muslim women are at the forefront in countering Islamic political activists and their use of religion in justifying women's oppression and justifying polygamy. In fact, many Muslim women challenge the subordination of women justified in the name of its religion, Islam. Instead, they fault the patriarchal interpretation of religious texts that allows polygamy for Muslim men.

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Muslim feminist's call for restrictions on polygamy as they believe that polygamy is a pre-Islamic practice and that conditions attached to polygamy like justice cannot be fulfilled in the modern age and therefore it should be banned/ restricted. In contrast to this view, a general belief among the Muslims in Malaysia is that the polygamy is an Islamic practice and mentioned in the Qur'an, therefore it cannot be questioned. This view is based on the fact that the Qur'an is unquestionable, what so ever mentioned in the Qur'an must be followed. Now this makes it a bit difficult to analyze whether the calls by Muslim feminists for restricting polygamy are questioning the Qur'an.

## 2. Method

It is imperative for a researcher employ research approaches that can provide me with the tools necessary for the analysis of issues. Because of the reason enumerated above, I have strategically employed quantitative survey. The use of a quantitative method was beneficial to this research because it contains consistent methods for data collection – most of the time in the form of a survey. Information that comes through this method can be organized into figures/ numbers to facilitate a form of statistical analysis (Meadows, 2003).

The participants for this study come from University of Malaya Malaysia who are final year female Muslim undergraduate studies. Locating my research in University was helpful as provided me with an environment where people are more open to debates and new ideas. Parts from this, students are the future leaders and they occupy several positions in government and private machinery and some may hold positions at the policy level. They are the ones who are going to decide the future of the nation. It is important to know their perceptions. Three faculties are chosen namely, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Academy of Islamic Studies and Faculty of Sciences. It is imperative that students in all three faculties are grounded in different academic fields; therefore a varying perception is expected from each faculty giving researcher a wide range of opinions on the issue.

To ensure the consistency of the result, a sample size is determined based on the calculations by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). This is mainly done to ensure that the probability of committing type I error is  $p < .05$ . The target set in the sample size was 100 % achieved as the researcher approached all the respondents in person, guided them step by step to fill in the survey questionnaire. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination, the respondents were 218 as shown in Table 1. From the marital factor, a total of 186 (85.32 %) out of 218 are single majority of the students still in the younger age (final year bachelor students). Thus the married students are only 32 (14.68%). The data collected is analyzed through SPSS and survey utilized a 5-item Likert Scale with responses as follows: Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Disagree and 5= strongly Disagree.

Table 1. Demographic of the respondents based on marital status

Variable	Category	n	%
Marital status	Single	186	85.32
	Married	32	14.68
Student faculty	Arts	32	14.68
	Islamic studies	123	56.42
	Science	63	28.90

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Agreement on polygamy issues

The results in Table 2 show that nearly half of the respondents (47 %) agree that polygamy is a social or moral issue and 34 % respondents agree that polygamy is a form of sexism. In addition to that, 46 % respondents agree that polygamy is an Islamic issue and at the same time 51% respondents disagree to involve in a polygamous marriage. Moreover, nearly half of the respondents (47 %) agree that since polygamy is an Islamic practice, therefore it cannot be questioned. And 42 % of the respondents disagree that polygamy brings more benefits to men than women.

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