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## **Gender Equality: Do I care?**

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### **Abstract**

The core objective of this study is to examine the future counselor's awareness of the importance of gender equality by cogitate on gender elements during counseling sessions via the questionnaire has been divided into three sections. As a result, there was a statistical significance of the effect of age and experiences on future counselor's gender equality awareness and its importance. In conclusion, the good understanding and high awareness of gender equality, the cultural institutions favoring males might themselves fade naturally with economic and social modernization so as to enable gender gaps to narrow and close later.

**Keywords:** Gender, Equality, Awareness, Policy.

## **Igualdad de género: ¿Me importa?**

### **Resumen**

El objetivo central de este estudio es examinar la conciencia del futuro consejero sobre la importancia de la igualdad de género al reflexionar sobre los elementos de género durante las sesiones de asesoramiento a través del cuestionario que se ha dividido en tres secciones. Como resultado, hubo un significado estadístico del efecto de la edad y las experiencias en la conciencia de igualdad de género del futuro consejero y su importancia. En conclusión, la buena comprensión y la alta conciencia de la igualdad de género, las

instituciones culturales que favorecen a los hombres podrían desvanecerse naturalmente con la modernización económica y social para permitir que las brechas de género se estrechen y cierren más tarde.

**Palabras clave:** Género, Igualdad, Conciencia, Política.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term gender has become a very vital element in sustainable development discourse. It draws us to rethink our identity and culture, which then explain on how it can intersect with race and ethnicity. The discussion on gender equality undeniably started from a deep understanding of the term itself. Gender is a socially-created division of society into those who are masculine and those who are feminine (JARY ET AL., 2005). Obviously, the interpretation of gender is referring to the specific qualities and behaviors of women and men, which are expected and experienced by societies at large. Thus, one's social identity is shaped through these expectations that evolve from the notion that some qualities, behaviors, characteristics, needs, and roles are naturally represented women or men. Subsequently, women are always overshadowed by their traditional roles and responsibilities. Historically, women are always in the reproductive and domestic fields where men normally fill up productive and public spaces; and this phenomenon is naturally accepted by the public (ERTAN ET AL., 2018).

Additionally, gender is a structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive roles and the set of practices that are governed by

this structure. This brings reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes (CONNELL, 2002; GROWN, 2005). Also, the term gender has been used interchangeably with the word sex. Apparently, sex refers to either female or male. Meanwhile, gender refers to the femininity or masculinity aspects of being a woman or man, a girl or boy which simply explains biological constructed. So, gender is a social construct and is used to describe these differences within a certain culture (BAKHYT ET AL, 2018).

An understanding of gender issues from a social, cultural, and psychological context, as well as the use of gender elements to look into an individual's own disciplines, is distinctly necessary. So this preliminary study attempts to examine how far future counselors are aware that gender elements should be considered during counselling sessions. Specifically, the objectives of this study are: (i) to evaluate the gender equality awareness among counselling students; and (ii) to explore the perception of the counselling students on the importance of gender equality.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The geographical coverage for this study is Kuala Terengganu, the capital city of Terengganu, Malaysia. The state of Terengganu is situated on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Kuala Terengganu is one of the eight districts in the state. Economically, Terengganu is one of the middle- income states in Malaysia, with average mean per capita

GDP (AS OF 2016 AT RM27, 268) and mean monthly household income stated about RM4, 816 in 2014, see Table 1. Most of Kuala Terengganu's 34,300 households (AS 2010) practice traditional occupations such as fishing, agriculture, and entrepreneurship.

Table 1: Mean Monthly Household Income and Incidence of poverty by State, 2004 and 2014

State	Mean Monthly Household Income (RM)		Percentage Incidence of Poverty (%)	
	2004	2014	2004	2014
W.P. Kuala Lumpur	5 011	10 629	1.5	0.1
W.P. Putrajaya	f	10401	g	0.0
Selangor	5 175	8 252	6.3	0.2
W.P. Labuan	2 487	7 591	23.0	3.9
Johor	3 076	6 207	2.0	0.0
Melaka	2 791	6 046	1.8	0.1
Pulau Pinang	3 531	5 993	0.3	0.3
Negeri Sembilan	2 886	5 271	1.4	0.4
Terengganu	1 984	4 816	15.4	0.6
Sarawak	2 725	4 934	7.5	0.9
Sabah	2 487	4 879	23.0	3.9
Perak	2 207	4 268	4.9	0.7
Pahang	2 410	4 343	4.0	0.7
Perlis	2 046	4 445	7.0	0.2
Kedah	2 126	4 478	7.0	0.3
Kelantan	1 829	3 715	10.6	0.9

Source: Economic Planning Unit, 2016.

Note:

f= Labuan is gazetted as a Federal Territory on 16 April 1984. Data for W.P. Sabah is part of Sabah.

g= Putrajaya is gazetted as a Federal Territory in 1 February 2001. Data for W.P. Putrajaya is part of Selangor.

This preliminary study has chosen Educational Institution A as a case study. The institution was selected based on its student populace, as a majority of its' enrollment are students from the east

coast of Malaysia. Generally, most of the students were from middle-income families, and originally come from Terengganu, and neighboring states, such as Kelantan and Pahang. To collect data, this preliminary study used a short questionnaire to gain information from 102 counseling students in Year 2 and 4 from four classes. They were randomly selected as participants at the end of their classes from 8 am to 6 pm from the 22nd to the 26th of October, 2017. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were tested in a pilot study (JAYACHANDRAN, 2015).

The questionnaire was administered by meeting the respondents at the end of their classes, distributing the questionnaires for them to promptly supply their answers and collecting the answers upon completion. The first page of the questionnaire clearly explains the purpose of the study, and gathers informed consent together with publication inform consent forms, which is required prior to completion of the survey. For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire has been divided into three sections: A- Demographic of Respondents, B-Gender Equality Awareness, and C-Gender Equality Importance to Everyday Politics. They were assessed using Likert scale and multiple-choice questions with an option for awareness on gender equality and its importance. Some open-ended questions were asked to further understand their experiences regarding the importance of gender equality. The data then was analysed using Software SPSS version 24.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 25 male and 77 female respondents of ages ranging from 18-30 were obtained. As mentioned earlier, they were randomly chosen from a determined sample size. Out of total male respondents, 6 respondents understood the meaning of gender equality, while only 8 female respondents out of 77 understand the meaning of the term. From the findings, most of them feel that women and men, including girls and boys, require the same needs, further proving their low understanding of gender and gender equality concept. This situation was supported by a chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction), which indicates there is no significant association between gender and gender equality understanding, where  $\chi^2(1, n=102=.60, p=.73, \phi=-.06.)$ . Almost all of them (100 respondents) admitted that they have never cared about the real gender issues when conducting counseling mock sessions as they never been instructed to do so; either by lecturers or subject syllabus. This situation has been anticipated by the authors as the level of gender awareness in Malaysia is still too low.

Most of the respondents (86 percent) had misconceptions about real idea of gender equality, as they believed that this equality is a fight for women's status to be the same as men's. They feel that gender equality has already been achieved because it appears that women are paid the same amount as men when they do the same job,

as well as women also being given equal opportunities to enter college and receive jobs afterward (HANISCH, 1970).

Also, a majority of the respondents (96 out of 102) agreed that women and men are treated fairly in the education and health sectors in Malaysia. This is strongly supported by the Malaysian Gender Gap Index (MGGI) 2017, where Malaysia remained its high score of 0.98 and 0.96 percent (World Economic Forum, 2017). This illustrates the narrowing gender gap in both education and health sectors respectively. Yet, in this study, most of the respondents feel treatments are still unfair when it comes to employment and promotion aspects, contrary to the narrowing gender gap in the country's educational system. Apparently, both girls and boys in Malaysia are given the same chances in obtaining their education, from primary to tertiary educational levels.

Yet, according to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2017), the differences can be seen at public higher educational institutions, where the enrolment of female students are far above the number of male students, see Table 2 below (MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION MALAYSIA, 2017). Undoubtedly, this is the direct impact of the government's turning point, when they have introduced free school fees so that everyone can receive education in Malaysia (KAWANA, 2010).



Table 2: Percentage of Students at Public Higher Education Institute by Gender, 2017

<b>Enrolment</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
532, 049	Female	330,210	62.06
	Male	201,839	37.94

Source: Adapted from Planning, Research and Policy Coordination Division, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, in Quick Facts2017- Malaysia Educational Statistics, 2017

Table 2 shows the number of male students has dropped in the higher educational system, which directly portrays the growing job opportunities for female students after graduating. But, the reality is women are still left behind, especially in terms of employment and promotion. One possible explanation for the restriction of women in exploring their potential can be due to social norms and existing prejudices on the roles and status of women in society. Additional possibilities are non-conducive working environment including time and distance to sustain employment of working wives and mothers, as well as less involvement and chances in making important decisions, except for those associated with the home. These were determined to be possible factors why women could not achieve reasonable space and opportunities for employment and promotion. Therefore, the employment gap between both women and men will further extended.

In this study, the first and fourth children between ages 18-30 years demonstrated to have more awareness of gender equality. In most situations, female students were determined to have a greater

awareness of gender equality as compared with their male counterparts. As previously mentioned, this may be due to the imbalanced number of female and male students in any educational institution, so the number of male respondents in this study is scant. Directly, this mirrors the increase of female student enrolment in 20 public universities in Malaysia, where it has increased to 62 percent enrolment in 2015 (YOUNG, 2011). Hence, the increased number of female students in higher educational institutions also contributing to the high percentage of female students' awareness of gender equality in this study. The respondents of this study consist of students from Year 2 and 4, and the results identified a majority of them (21-30 years old) were the sixth child and above in their family.

From the findings, an increase in age and experience has an effect on increasing awareness of gender equality and its importance among respondents. There was an average, positive correlation between the two variables i.e. age and gender equality awareness, where  $r=.32$ ,  $n=100$ ,  $p<.0005$ , with an increased in age and experience associated with higher gender equality awareness and its importance to everyday politics. Definitely, this is due to the norms and beliefs maintained in a person's mentality, which is affected by the patriarchal system in place in society. Noor AZIZAH'S (2012) study maintained that Malaysia is predominantly patriarchal society, and therefore the existence of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development mainly focuses its documents, forwarded resolutions, and activities on women's development. She also added that women in

Asia, including Malaysia, have been educated not to object to the existing patriarchal system. Furthermore, this phenomenon is also naturally found in middle-class families, as reported in most human development studies.

To explore the perception of counseling students on the importance of gender equality in everyday life, they were asked their perception of whether women and men should be treated equally and be given equal chances in making decisions in political, social, and economic aspects. Their experiences of such situations are indicated by answering either Yes or No.

Table 3: Importance of Equal Chances in Political, Economic and Social Aspects between Women and Men

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Female	6	19
Male	6	71
<b>Total (No.)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>90</b>

Source: Authors, 2017

Table 3 above illustrates only a small number (12 respondents) of counseling students feel that gender equality is important in political, economic and social decision making. Conversely, majority of 71 females and 19 male students think it is not important to have equal chances in decision-making. They perceive women as being emotionally unstable when making decisions and women have lack leadership skills. As compared to men, they agreed men are more professional and able to be good leaders. Previous studies found this

situation occurs due to the common societal and cultural perception where women should perform traditional roles, while men must always be in productive areas.

Across the globe, many scholars debate that the prevailing patriarchal culture that led women to continuously being oppressed, but did not religion (INGLEHART AND NORRIS, 2003). Inglehart and Norris further added the rigid understanding of gender roles held by the patriarchy, such as men being a breadwinner while women are homemakers; determine the rights and status of women in society, as well as the division of labor at home and at the workplace. Considering this imbalance from the Western point of view, VILLALOBOS (2016) expresses that

the collectivist sense of mythology legal origin, could be studied from different perspectives of social sciences and philosophy, ... but many sometimes lacking a sense of justice compatible with our culture Western. (pag. 10)

Subsequently, the results illustrate that future counselors have less concern or are ignorant in considering gender difference gender needs and opportunities during counseling sessions.

Throughout this preliminary study, its major implication is the knowledge contribution to psychological and gender theories by explaining how counseling students (or precisely the future counselors) in this research affected the concepts and awareness of gender as well gender equality. In many psychological theories,

gender has the cognitive construction where it could be transferred from parents or family members to children based on familial transmission model. The model illustrates how gender types were shaped among the family members through the process of understanding and recognition within the family themselves. Therefore, parents are important influences on children's behavior, so their parenting styles i.e how they communicate with his or her child (BAUMRIND, 1971). Daily communications had shaped and determined the knowledge and later transformed as expertise and science within the family members. These directly affect the individuals' (in this study referred to counseling students) understanding of gender identity, roles and expression thus lessening their awareness on the importance of gender equality due to gender misconceptions.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This preliminary study conducted to stimulate gender equality awareness in highlighting the understanding and its importance at educational institutions in Malaysia. The study has shown that the counseling students both female and male at this Educational Institution A have low understanding and awareness of gender equality issues. Similar to other previous studies, this study concludes that female students have more awareness of gender equality in everyday politics as compared to male students. Therefore, the importance of

gender equality cannot be ignored. So, the knowledge about gender and gender relations are significance among professionals like counselors in moving towards a more transformative gender approach in Malaysia.

It is believed the good understanding and high awareness of gender equality, the cultural institutions favoring males might themselves fade naturally with economic and social modernization so as to enable gender gaps to narrow and close later. Though, there must be a critical role played by policymakers and ministries in accelerating the process. An intervention at the national level to the issue of gender equality is also needed so that laws, policies and strategies in promoting it in different categories of institutions and spaces can be developed.

A lot of initiatives should be taken in ensuring the development policies and its programs were more gender-sensitive. The effort of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia in leading the Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) initiative is one of the budgetary processes improvement efforts under country's macroeconomic policy towards achieving gender equality. Besides the initial studies on gender understanding and awareness of gender equality, it is suggested that more researches should be conducted to narrow down the gender researches gap in Malaysia. From the bottom level, it is suggested that more studies need to be conducted that look at the perception towards gender distinction and experiences on

relationship between women and men in everyday politics. Also, future gender studies should research the effective ways of gender equality practices among primary students; and society's perception of the differences between Islamic thought and gender equality practices.

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