

**Nota Penyelidikan/Research Note**

## Changes of Gender Relations in Kuching Malay Household

Perubahan Hubungan Gender dalam Isi Rumah Melayu, Kuching

DAYANG ASMAH AWANG HAMDAN

### ABSTRAK

*Nota penyelidikan ini menganalisis hubungkait di antara pengaruh-pengaruh perubahan sosial yang lebih luas seperti lingkungan keluarga, pendidikan dan pekerjaan terhadap pengalaman wanita Melayu muda dalam melakukan kerja domestik dan penilaian ke atas perubahan peranan gender dalam melaksanakan kerja domestik tersebut. Seramai 20 orang wanita muda yang berusia di antara 19 hingga 27 tahun, yang belajar dan tinggal di Kuching dan sekitarnya terlibat di dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini mengguna soal selidik dan temubual semi-struktur bagi mengenalpasti dan merungkai penilaian dan jangkaan-jangkaan wanita terhadap perubahan hubungan gender di dalam perkahwinan dan keluarga. Terdapat tiga hasil kajian yang diperolehi dalam kajian ini. Pertama, kerja rumah diatur mengikut pembahagian di antara kerja di dalam dan luar rumah di mana kerja di dalam rumah kebanyakannya dikuasai oleh kaum wanita, manakala kerja luar rumah dilakukan oleh kaum lelaki. Kedua, terbukti bahawa lelaki lebih fleksibel dan mempunyai pilihan untuk melakukan kerja rumah atau pun tidak. Ketiga, terdapat peningkatan dalam penglibatan lelaki dalam kerja-kerja 'dalam' rumah, terutama sekali setelah mereka meningkat dewasa. Terdapat sebilangan wanita muda percaya bahawa pembahagian kerja rumah yang sedia ada harus dikekalkan, tetapi dalam masa yang sama mereka menggalakkan penglibatan lelaki dalam kerja rumah, manakala sebilangan yang lain menganggap pandangan tersebut sebagai ketinggalan zaman dan harus ditolak memandangkan mereka kini sudah terlibat dalam bidang pekerjaan.*

*Kata kunci: Hubungan gender, peranan gender, kerja-kerja rumah, wanita Melayu muda, perubahan sosial*

## ABSTRACT

*This research note analyses the connection between the influences of broader social changes such as the family circles, education and employment, media and Islamic teaching on young Malay women's experiences of domestic work and their evaluation of changing gender roles in the performance of domestic work. The 20 young women who participated in this study all live in or around Kuching, and between the ages of 19 and 27 years. A questionnaire and structured-interview are employed in order to identify and explore young women's evaluations and expectations of changes of gender relations in marriage and family. There are three main findings of the study. First, household work is organised around a distinction between inside and outside chores, and in relation to this, the preponderance of inside household chores are routinely performed by women, outside chores are performed predominantly by men. Second, there is evidence that men have more leeway and choice about the extent to which they perform household tasks. Third, there is evidence that men are slowly increasing their participation in 'inside' domestic work, especially after they have grown up. A few of the young women believe that the existing gender division of domestic labour should be preserved, but at the same time encouraging men's participation in domestic works. However, some of them think it is old-fashioned and should be rejected as they are now in employment.*

*Keywords: Gender relations, gender roles, domestic works, young Malay women, social change*

## INTRODUCTION

This research note discusses the connection between the influences of broader social changes such as the family circles, education and employment on young Malay women's experiences of domestic work and their evaluation of changing gender roles in the performance of domestic work. Housework for these young women is not just about juggling time; it also raises broader issues such as the role and status of women in the Malay society. Here, husbands', sons' and brothers' abilities to perform so-called 'women's work' is important, not only of sharing the load, but also relates to status and authority in household power relations between men and women. This research note discusses a set of practices that relates to a central symbolic marker of women's subordination to men in the segregation of domestic work in Kuching Malay household.

One of the most contested areas of gender relations to emerge following women's increasing participation in education and the wage labour market is gender relations in the household. Two trends observed across the world in relation to changes to gender relations in the household are a shift towards more

egalitarian and equal relations between men and women, and the increased involvement of men in domestic work (Leeder 2004). There is evidence of both of these trends to some degree in the comments and the expectations of young Malay women interviewed for this study. Yet, as become evident, the young women also endorse a system of gender relations in the household that (a) emphasises a gendered division of labour in relation to the distribution of and responsibility of tasks considered male and female and (b) reinstates a gender hierarchy that situates men as household heads and subordinates women to men. Nevertheless, as their comments and experiences demonstrate, there have been changes to gender relations in the household over their life-time. Furthermore, there is an expectation that such relations and gender division will be further modified over time to fit with their roles as wives, mothers and workers.

One reason why researchers are interested in the study of gender roles and relations in the household is because the family is seen as a primary agent of socialisation or social learning (Leeder 2004: 36). Gender socialisation is of course a learning process that occurs not only within the family but also throughout one's lifetime, through our interactions with school, peers, community, work, media and religion (Leeder 2004: 37). Yet the forms of gender roles and relations both promoted in the family and in relation to an ideal notion of family are particularly important in shaping young women's ideas about their roles as mother, housewife and worker. In the Malay household, Roziah Omar (1994) found that Malay children learn gender roles by playing and imitating adults (*orang dewasa*) within the household. The influence of Islam and Malay *adat* (local customary law) embedded in constructions of gender roles teaches Malay children at an early age how to be "feminine" or "masculine". For young Malay girls, concepts of how to be a loyal wife and a competent mother are learned by observing their mothers and participating in the domestic division of labour (Roziah Omar 1994: 22–23).

Gender-specific roles in the household and gender divisions in domestic labour and decision-making have been examined in many countries across the world, including Australia (de Vaus 2005), China (Sheng 2005), Iran (Azadarmaki 2005), Kuwait (Al Naser 2005) and Malaysia (Manderson 1980; Jariah Masud 1998). In addition, there has been some analysis of a shift from more "traditional" family structures, where women are expected to be homemakers and men breadwinners (Jamilah Ariffin 1992; Leeder 2004; Jariah Masud 1998), to less rigid and more egalitarian models (Leeder 2004). Nevertheless, research from around the world suggests that distinctive and explicit gender roles still predominate. For example, a study by de Vaus (2005: 75) of Australian families found that despite some changes to the traditional model, men spend more time than their female partners in paid work, whereas partnered women do at least twice as much domestic work as their male partners. He found an observable gender division of domestic work, where partnered women with dependent children continue to do most of the cooking, laundry and other "inside" work,

while men perform “outside work”, such as gardening and home maintenance (ibid 75).

Gender segregation in domestic work is also explicit in Chinese families (Sheng 2005). Tasks like purchasing food and cooking, shopping, washing clothes, cleaning rooms and taking care of children are primarily performed by women, while men dominate in regard to heavy tasks such as purchasing grain and coal, and changing gas tanks (ibid: 107). In Muslim countries like Kuwait, men are still regarded as superior, despite the rising number of marriages between people of the same educational level (Al Naser 2005: 523). According to Aishah @ Eshah Mohamed (2000), the notion that women are physically weak compared with men has informed the division of labour in the household and reinforced gender segregation in the family in Malaysia.

The Malay community in Kuching continues to emphasise the role of women in managing the household. This study shows that the most important socialisation agents here are mothers, who continue to teach household management skills to their daughters. Yet, it is important to draw attention to the shifts that may be occurring as women are increasingly involved in formal education and employment. It is also important to acknowledge that gender relations among Malays may have been less rigid and more complementary in the past than is sometimes recognised in models based on Western experience, or drawn from strictly textual Islamic sources. For example, Jamilah Ariffin (1992) has argued that in the past, Malay women spent most of their time in the household as a result of family organisation factors, not simply due to ideological factors. She argues that women spent much of their time at home managing the household, looking after children and work together with their husbands, either in agriculture or fishing, in ways that were complementary (Jamilah Ariffin 1992). In this case, we should expect that new family organisational factors associated with women’s increased involvement in education and employment may also shift existing practices.

#### STUDYING YOUNG MALAY WOMEN IN SARAWAK

The 20 young women who participated in this study all live in or around Kuching, and were aged between 19 and 27. They were either studying (13), working (6) or looking for work (1). The Malay population in Sarawak is mostly concentrated in the cities of Kuching, Miri, Betong and Sibul (Sarawak State Planning Unit 2007: 13). For this reason, the study was conducted in and around Kuching, in order to attract the participation of young Malay women. They were sought through networks such as school and university networks, as well as personal networks, which included relatives and friends. This method of network sampling is a useful technique for accessing participants who are otherwise difficult to recruit.

In order to identify and explore young women's evaluations and expectations of family and marriage, two data collection methods were combined: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was designed to collect young women's profiles, while the structure interview was designed to provide the opportunity for young women to discuss and express issues and ideas regarding their views about gender relations in the household. This study was limited by time and resources to a small qualitative study of urban-based young women between the ages of 19 and 30. For these reasons, this study cannot purport to reflect the views of young women living in Sarawak in general.

With the permission of participants, all 20 semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A form of narrative analysis was used in reviewing each interview in order to compare and contrast the data received across the spread of interviews.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### GENDER AND THE DIVISION OF LABOUR IN THE HOUSEHOLD: PATTERNS, PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS

In order to analyse some of the general features of the domestic division of labour in Kuching, informants were asked to outline the distribution of household tasks in their households. Researcher considered six types of housework, including cooking, house cleaning, laundry, outside housework, childcare, and other housework as shown in Table 1. In the first instance, the researcher asked informants to recall the division of domestic labour in their family when they were around 10 years of age (past practices), and then compared this to patterns of domestic labour in their current household (present practices).

None of the young women in this research come from families that employed maids to assist with household chores as they came from low-income families that could not afford to hire other people to manage the household. For this reason, all family members in these households participated at times in domestic work. Furthermore, many of the young women had mothers who were full-time housewives, who therefore managed to do the housework with the assistance of children, particularly daughters. In contrast, male members of the family seem to have more leeway in regard to whether they performed domestic work or not.

Three general claims can be made on the basis of this research. First, household work is organised around a distinction between inside and outside chores, and in relation to this, the preponderance of inside household chores are routinely performed by women, outside chores are performed predominantly by men. Second, there is evidence that men have more leeway and choice about the extent to which they perform household tasks. This is particularly notable in the case of inside chores (particularly with fathers and brothers), and less so when it comes to "outside" maintenance tasks such as washing cars and motorbikes.

Third, there is evidence that men are slowly increasing their participation in “inside” domestic work, especially after they have grown up.

#### PAST PRACTICES

In general, informants’ recollections of the domestic division of labour at the time they were growing up reveal four common features. First, the young women agree that there was differentiation between male and female members, but also in terms of age, in the distribution of these activities. As illustrated by Table 1, when they were small most of the domestic work was done by mothers, particularly in areas such as cooking, house cleaning and laundry. In terms of childcare, the mothers provided most of the personal care, hygiene and food preparation for small children. Younger children in particular, they recall, received more attention from mothers than from their fathers. The young women’s fathers performed outdoor housework (such as washing vehicles and gardening), as well as taking care of other areas (paying utility bills, buying groceries and doing indoor, outdoor and car repairs).

Second, the consistent boundary marker between female and male chores was the division between inside and outside tasks. Inside housework such as cooking, cleaning, laundry and childcare was overwhelmingly done by female family members (including mothers but also sisters, aunts and grandmothers), whereas outdoor housework such as washing vehicles, car repairs and outdoor maintenance was carried out by men. The two grey areas of indoor maintenance and bill paying, which were carried out by male family members. This division reflects assumptions about men’s and women’s spheres of competence. It is obvious from the table that women’s primary identification is with the interior of the house, and men’s identification is with external matters, whether paying bills, fixing the car or outdoor repairs.

Nevertheless, a third feature suggests a significant variation in the domestic division of labour across the sample on the basis of household composition (age and composition of household members) and household structure (for example, extended or nuclear households). In the families with younger children, domestic labour patterns were slightly different. Here, the mothers did most of the household chores and spent more time attending to small children. More recent research suggests that parents with infants share certain tasks that earlier would have fallen to the women. Hossain et al. (2005) found that wives with young children have some help with household-related tasks, such as buying groceries from husbands. For those families with many children, the mothers are assisted by older daughters and sometimes by their husbands with household chores such as cooking, cleaning, laundry and childcare. Furthermore, brothers also help with household chores, such as taking out the garbage, washing vehicles, paying bills, doing inside and outside maintenance and car repairs. In addition, the sons and daughters in the family would help with “inside” and “outside” light work and be likely to help reduce their parents’ tasks.

TABLE 1. The Comparison between Division of Domestic Labour among Family Members in Childhood Household and Current Household

No.	Types of housework	Division of domestic labour among family members in childhood household (Past practices)					Division of domestic labour among family members in current household (Present practices)							
		Mother	Father	Sister	Brother	Informant	Mother	Father	Sister	Brother	Informant			
1	Cooking													
	a. Preparing breakfast	19	3	5		1	13				6			9
	b. Preparing lunch	19	1	5		1	12			1	7			10
	c. Preparing dinner	19	1	5		1	13			1	6			10
2	House cleaning													
	a. Washing dishes	15	2	11	1	8	8	1		1	11	2		16
	b. Cleaning kitchen	16	2	9	1	6	9	1		1	8	2		17
	c. Mopping floor	12	2	10		6	6	1		1	9	2		15
	d. Vacuuming	8	1	4	1	4	5	1		1	6	1		11
	e. Taking out the garbage	9	5	6	3	4	6	1		1	10	6		11
	f. Sweeping floors	14	2	9	1	10	7	1		1	10	4		15
	g. Cleaning bathroom	14	3	8	2	7	9	1		1	8	4		12
	h. Cleaning the furniture	13	3	8	1	7	6	2		2	7	4		12
3	Laundry													
	a. Washing clothes	15	2	8		3	7				8			12
	b. Drying clothes	15	1	9		5	9			1	8			12
	c. Folding clothes	17	1	7		5	10				9			14
	d. Ironing clothes	15	1	6	1	5	7				9	1		14

(Continued)





The young women in the study also recalled that the labour of other relatives and community networks was an important feature in reducing the burden of household tasks when they were children. At this time, some of the young women lived in extended families consisting of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Grandmothers in particular seemed to contribute a great deal to the housework, particularly cooking, house cleaning, laundry and childcare, and in this way relieved the workloads of their daughters and daughters-in-law. In terms of house maintenance, many young women's fathers did this alone or with the help of sons (for minor jobs) or relatives. One young woman said her cousins would help in order to cut the costs of house maintenance.

#### PRESENT PRACTICES

The picture of the division of domestic labour at the time the young women were growing up differs to a degree from the division of domestic labour they report for the contemporary period. Not surprisingly, their own contribution has greatly increased as young adult daughters. Providing assistance to aging mothers is also an issue for some. The other change, which is perhaps more surprising is the increased contribution of fathers and brothers to 'indoor' domestic tasks, although this is still much lower than that of their mothers, sisters and themselves.

In other respects, contemporary practices reflect many of the earlier patterns. For example, inside domestic work is still dominated by females. Only now the cooperation of mothers, unmarried sisters and the young women themselves is higher than in the past. (The researcher was also informed that married sisters establish a new place of residence with their husbands and children, or else live with their parents-in-laws and therefore could not contribute to housework). The three areas in which the young women predominate are cooking, house cleaning and laundry. Over half of the informants perform regular house cleaning and laundry, and while they also do considerable amounts of cooking, these tasks are still predominantly done by their mothers. In discussing their involvement in cooking, the young women report that as little girls in the family they could not help their mothers because they were too young and in school. Nevertheless, even as children they helped with lighter cooking tasks such as washing and cutting vegetables or peeling shallots and garlic.

In addition, the introduction of household technologies has made certain chores, such as laundry, easier. The use of washing machines has shortened the time spent doing laundry and made it possible for them to simultaneously attend to other household chores.

The second notable feature as shown in Table 1 is the higher participation of the young women's fathers and brothers in indoor domestic tasks. The table has been prepared on the basis of young women's recollections of the past and their impressions of the present. They are thus likely to be more subjective than, for example, household surveys based on observation or diaries. Nevertheless,

the shift suggested from past practices and present practices may be indicative of real trends, particularly when considered in the light of the young women's comments, explored later in this section, on the importance of men learning and helping with domestic tasks.

The Table 1 shows that fathers are still heavily involved in outdoor household tasks such as washing vehicles and gardening, taking and picking up children from school, and indoor and outdoor repairs. In some areas brothers have taken on an increasing share, including washing vehicles and gardening, but their involvement in other activities notably indoor and outdoor repairs have declined while their father's involvement have increased. This may suggest that as fathers retire and sons move into the workforce, the former do not call on sons as much. More interesting is the higher participation of the young women's brothers in inside domestic work than in the past. This is most apparent in their involvement in house cleaning and to a limited extent in childcare.

Another interesting feature of present practices is the high level of cooperation between parents and children in household tasks. This cooperation also extends to assistance between brothers and sisters. The young women gave several reasons for this level of cooperation in the current household. The first has to do with changing family composition in terms of age. Obviously, the young women and their siblings are now grown up and more able to help parents. The other side of the coin is that parents are getting older and do not have the strength to undertake the same number and intensity of domestic tasks as in the past. A second reason is that young women and their siblings are already familiar with domestic tasks. As Table 1 shows, even as children, they had been taught to perform many tasks. For girls in particular, this is because the Malays in Kuching place importance on daughters' competency and skills in domestic work, not only to make a daughter more competitive in the marriage stakes, for all children in general, learning how to perform household tasks is seen as important to the cultivation of independence and willingness to help others. A third reason for the high level of cooperation between parents and children relates to the idea of *membalas budi ibu bapa* or 'repaying one's parents'. As the young women explained, one way in which children can repay the debt children owe their parents for having raised them is to help them with household chores, and this is a way of showing respect to one's elders and acknowledging one's sense of *membalas budi ibu bapa*.

#### THE DIVISION OF LABOUR BEHIND THE PATTERNS

As discussed above, the Malay women in Kuching still do most of the indoor household tasks. Overall, the study found that the inside domestic work is dominated by women, even though in some situations and for particular reasons, men might participate in the domestic sphere. Young women say that this distinctive gender segregation amongst Malay families in Kuching is passed

down by parents. For example, Dahlia noted the influence of her parents and the division of tasks allocated to sons and daughters:

Yes, there is [a differentiation of domestic work], for instance, my father would teach my brother to do heavy-duty tasks ...[and] other outside tasks like carrying the wood, as my father always asks my brother to accompany him to the jungle...while my sister would be asked to do the cooking [and] laundry.

The experiences of these young women demonstrate how household tasks tend to reflect the gendered competencies of their mothers and fathers. Children are instructed to perform different skills depending on their gender and the examples set by their mothers and fathers. However, this research also indicates that in certain circumstances male household members will do the inside housework. For instance, brothers and sons will cook when their sisters are at work or away and when their mothers get old, as is the case for Ida, who has had to share the housework with her brother since her mother became frail:

Yes, there is [division in the domestic work], and some men's work cannot be done by the females, but cooking has been taken over by my brother and father. They are good cooks... In the past, when my mother was still young [she did all of the household chores], but now she is old, so all the housework has been placed on me and my brother's shoulders. What is good about my brother is that he will do any [form of] work. If I am not at home [when I am at university], usually he will cook [for the family], because my mother cannot manage the housework on her own. So my brother will help [her to do the housework].

According to Maisarah, not only do her brothers know how to do housework, but they can do some things better than she can:

There are things that they are good at that we [sisters] cannot do. For example, all my three brothers excel in cooking. But we [sisters] cannot force them to cook; if we do, do you know what will happen to the kitchen then? So my brothers have to cook voluntarily, only then will everything go fine. For instance, my brother, who is a police inspector, has a tough body — he can bake a very smooth sponge cake. When we [sisters] come to the kitchen while they are cooking, they are very fussy, complaining. That is why we get teased, "Go away from here...go away."

Yet, while Maisarah's brothers are excellent cooks, they cook very much on a voluntary basis, for a special occasion, but never on a day-to-day basis. This points to a different relationship to housework, such as cooking, for many brothers and fathers of these young women: a sense of choice and voluntariness in their performance of household duties. This leads some young woman to see their brothers as lazy and unwilling to help. Often, their justification for not helping rests on a perception that domestic work is the duty or responsibility of women (even if sometimes men also participate in these activities). The following is from a narrative by Eisah on the domestic division of labour in her family:

There is a marked difference in delegating household chores. Females monopolize the household chores in my family. [Even though my brothers] are assigned the job of taking the rubbish out, [my sisters and I] will have to do it because they are just lazy. My male siblings just watch TV, doing nothing at home and they hang out around the village. The chores are

mostly done by the female members of my family. If we [my sisters and I] argue [with my brothers], they will answer back “this is your [women] work”, and “we are busy”. We do a lot of work, but my male siblings do almost nothing. If they are told to take out the rubbish, they will retort “too much work. This is your work!” My mother has assigned the work to them. My mother has to give those orders repeatedly, “the boys should get the rubbish out of the house”. My elder brother is quite rebellious. He retorts, “the women should do the household chores! Men are doing paid jobs outdoors”. What he is trying to tell us is that chores at home should be done and settled by the women.

Women’s responses to the division of labour in their families vary, but in general, they accept the attitude that responsibility for domestic labour belongs to women even when they also work outside the home. Nevertheless, the participation of men in housework is seen as most welcome and in some situations, desirable.

Junaidah, on the other hand, supports the view that there are distinct spheres of work for men and women. She identifies as men’s work painting the house, mowing, and collecting dry leaves, whereas women’s work includes sweeping the floor, mopping, washing dishes, and any inside work. She says, ... “since there is men’s work, let the men do it, and when there is women’s work, so give it to women, am I right?” ... Separating ‘feminine work’ and ‘masculine work’ is also perceived as important for preserving notions of masculinity in Malay society. The risks of allowing boys to do ‘feminine work’ at home are something that Rina explicitly addressed in her comments. When asked whether she would encourage her future son to do tasks designated as ‘female’, she argued, ... “there’s no need for him to do women’s work. He might end up becoming a *pondan* [transvestite]!” ... As she explained, her reasons here were based on the experiences of her young male cousin:

In his family, all [his siblings] are females; therefore, he tends to imitate them [their attitudes and attributes]. He is becoming more feminine now, but he is still in Standard 6 [which she considers a vulnerable age]. That’s why I think that he should not be exposed to too many feminine activities, for I fear that he will end up being a transvestite. He is very daring, he likes to groom himself... [Normally], men do not have a complete set of cosmetic products [facial wash, toner cleanser, etc], do they? ... But he has such a complete set. He has perfumes. He doesn’t favour the perfume meant for men, but the women’s brand. He is just a Standard 6 pupil!

In the interviews, the researcher referenced a Malay proverb: “Women, no matter how highly educated they are, their place is still in the kitchen” and used this to draw out the opinions of the young women. In response, many young women noted how society still shoulders women with the burden of running the household and looking after children. As Nora said:

No matter how high a woman’s education is, even though she possesses a diploma, etc., her place is [still considered] to be in the kitchen [and] looking after children. [Women’s status] is not more than that, even though they have their own career. But for men, like my brother, my mother never encouraged him [to do the housework], that was up to him.

Maisarah, however, fervently opposed the above proverb, arguing that this idea was old-fashioned and conservative, particularly as it is still upheld by rural dwellers (as on her Bidayuh maternal side of the family). In fact, she wants to banish this notion from the minds of Malaysians: ... “It is not [only women] who go to the kitchen. See there are many male chefs now that do this!.. Sometimes when their daughters go to work, the sons will not go into the kitchen! So, this stereotype must be banished from Malaysians’ minds.”

In contrast, Siti believes that women should retain the control and monopoly of domestic work, even when they are working outside the home. For her, women’s central involvement in domestic work is a positive thing and gives them an area of expertise that men do not have:

Of course even though we are PhD-holders, we still will cook, wash the dishes, and tidy up the house. But I don’t see this as negative. I don’t think that even though we are highly educated that is negative. Normally, as the older generation say, and in my opinion, usually women should be in the kitchen, regardless of their level of education. Normally, people take this saying to be something negative. But as for me, I do not agree. I feel that this has its advantages. That is because, even when it concerns men, do they know 100 per cent about everything? No! We as women, once we are working outside the home, we still working within the home, and we definitely will do our chores. We are the accountants, we take care of the home, we manage our children, and just about everything! So we have the advantage in these aspects. So I don’t see the old proverb as a negative phrase.

Siti emphasises the importance for women of exercising their power in the domestic sphere, but at the same time, argues that women should also have outside employment. Raised in an inter-ethnic marriage between an educated Malay father and Chinese full-time housewife mother, Siti observes that on both sides of her family, the women are mostly housewives. Yet she thinks that women in “the modern world” (*pada masa sekarang*) should combine housework and outside employment, in this way, ... “we ladies [will become] well-rounded in decision making. We will be good at many things. I would like that sort of culture to exist.”

Nora says that women needed to be capable and competent in housework in order to avoid community gossip. Her mother advised her, ... “if we go to our neighbours to help them to prepare for a wedding ceremony, [or] visit people, at least we can help them out. Don’t just sit in a corner not wanting to help them”... Nora added that the role of mothers in familiarising their daughters with domestic work is crucial to their future lives. She believes that mothers should be firm with the children when they are young, in order to avoid problems in the future. She quoted her neighbour, who said of Nora, ... “I just wonder how this girl can be good at managing housework. My daughter cannot do any housework”... and said that mothers need to train their daughters to do housework.

There are also differences of opinion among the young women as to whether existing gender roles and division of labour should change. Perspectives range from those who wish to make only slight adjustments through to those who seek more equal relations and partnerships in the household. In general, however,

reform rather than rejection was the flavour of their comments. For example, Eisah sees the need for some change but also believes that “daughters should do the cooking”. As she commented:

There may be slight changes, with the exception that those obviously feminine jobs should be delegated to my daughters, [for example] the daughters should do the cooking. There is nothing wrong with the sons washing their own plates after every meal. After that, tidy up the bedrooms and do their own laundry. My boyfriend told me that he washes his own clothes. That’s why I say that it’s good to have a child who is used to doing things on his own.

When she was asked whether daughters should also take on some of the chores typically performed by sons, she was hesitant:

The daughters...ummmm, it will be fine if they wash the car. Maybe there is a limit to what can be done. It might be easier to instruct the sons to do outdoor work, while we have to set a limit on what the daughters can do. There are some chores that they can do while others need to be done accordingly in order to differentiate the type of labour associated with the respective genders.

Ida agrees with the division of domestic roles in Malay families, but thinks it would be beneficial for both men and women to know their opposite gender’s tasks, in order to reduce dependency. Siti also recognises the need for both men and women to be familiar with the chores and duties of the other sex:

What I mean is that at least I *know* how to clean the drain as I did this once. My brother has in the past cooked and sliced an onion; he at least knows how to do this. At least when we are married later, we will be better able to understand and to cope with certain situations.

One of the most sustained rejections of differentiating chores on the basis of gender came from the married woman, Suhana, 24, with an eight-month old baby boy. She says that her husband is very helpful with household chores. He learned how to do housework as a small boy and now does most of the housework, such as cooking, house cleaning, laundry, and childcare, as well as outside household tasks. Suhana says that she will never differentiate between the chores allocated to her sons and daughters in the future.

The above discussion shows that the traditional roles of women in the domestic realm are still important to many Malay women, even though they increasingly participate in the workforce for personal satisfaction and to meet the economic needs of the family. The opinions of informants show how young women’s views of domestic work are changing to some extent, in response to women’s actual and predicted lives as wage earners. All the women who participated in the study are either studying or working and can foresee a time when they will need to balance their outside work and family lives. Crucial to this balance is the participation of men in the domestic sphere in order to ease their burden. This is not to deny that women believe that domestic work and childcare are important arenas for women. For some, such as Maisarah and Siti, they are the primary responsibility of women. Here it is interesting to note that there was no mention of the employment of domestic servants. Nevertheless, even among

women such as Siti, who believes that women should retain their gender roles in terms of domestic work, there is a perception that women can request and expect assistance from men, as suggested by Maisarah.

### CONCLUSION

The research has shown that a few of the young women believe that the existing gender division of domestic labour should be preserved, while a few think that it is old-fashioned and should be rejected, as nowadays women work outside the home. The majority, however, stand somewhere in the middle, accepting women's role in performing domestic labour, while at the same time encouraging men to participate to some degree in domestic work. The participation of men in the domestic realm is welcomed and seen as evidence of their respect for their wife and commitment to their family. As they appreciate – some from watching their own mothers – this help is needed more by young women who work outside the home. Underlying such an attitude is a well-developed view of themselves as workers outside the home as well inside.

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