



Musawah Global Life Stories Project

MALAYSIA COUNTRY REPORT **Documenting Women's Life Stories** **Relating to *Qiwamah* and *Wilayah***

Life Stories Project Malaysian team

Sisters in Islam



2014

**This report, which was submitted to the Musawah Secretariat by the country team,
has been lightly edited by the Secretariat for format and style**

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Sisters in Islam and the life stories project in Malaysia.....	1
The Malaysian team.....	1
Project timeline	3
Project Implementation	5
Preparation of research plan	5
Selection of resource persons.....	5
Life stories methodology workshop, 4-5 June 2013	5
Interviews	5
Analysis.....	5
Capacity building	6
Life Stories	8
Life story #1: Nadia	8
Rebellious childhood	8
Finding meaning through art.....	8
Father’s secret	8
Marriage—a joint responsibility	10
Life story #2: Mimi	11
Childhood.....	11
Marriage and divorce	11
From Bangsar to Keramat.....	12
Activism	13
Life story #3: Mawar	15
Source of income.....	15
Contributions in the household.....	16
Distribution of property among the siblings	16
Challenges as head of the family.....	16
Influences in life.....	17
Life story #4: Wati.....	18
Teenage years & first love story	18
Love story	19
Attacked by J’s wife	19
We solemnised our marriage in Thailand!	19
Life as a wife	20
Pregnant!	20
My secret bubble burst!	21
Acceptance of first wife	21
Taking the backseat as a second wife.....	21
Life story #5: Lola.....	22
Tok Wan.....	22
Sharing a life	22
Societal expectations.....	23
Analysis and Reflections.....	24
1. Husband as protector and provider	24
2. The role of family and community in reinforcing gender inequality	24

3. Religion is used to justify conditions of inequality	24
4. Polygamy, not a happy ending	24
5. Dynamics of parents' relationships	24
6. The State as (failed) protector and provider	24
7. Financial Independence.....	25
8. Equality is possible in a Muslim marriage.....	25
Planned Outputs	26
1. Animation.....	26
2. Documentary	26
3. Theatre.....	27
Appendix	28
Socioeconomic data.....	28

Introduction

Sisters in Islam and the life stories project in Malaysia

Sisters in Islam (SIS) (<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/>) aims to advocate women's rights through an Islamic framework. We have designed the Life Stories Project here to complement and feed into the ongoing national advocacy work. The process and methodology developed by Musawah is shared at the national level towards capacity building for the organisation and its partners. The feminist research methodology framing this project, which stresses on reciprocity and empowerment, also provides a model for future knowledge building initiatives at Sisters in Islam.

In summary, the objectives of the Malaysian Life Stories projects are to:

1. Create an understanding of the concept of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and its application in the Muslim family life in Malaysia.
2. Document the lived realities of women negotiating *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in Malaysia.
3. Contribute towards national advocacy projects
4. Contribute towards capacity building for Sisters in Islam and partners
5. Empower resource persons, create alliances, and foster movement building

The Malaysian team

Coordinator

SIS engaged a local project coordinator, Rusalina Idrus, who is a trained anthropologist, for the Malaysia Life Stories project from April 2012, to November 2013. The project coordinator worked full time from April to November 2012, and part time from December 2012 to December 2013. The coordinator represented the Malaysian team at the Methodology workshop in Bali in April 2013 (along with Suri Kempe, the advocacy manager at SIS), and at the mid-term review workshop in Kuala Lumpur held in November 2013.

The coordinator worked with the staff at SIS and several other partners in conducting the project in Malaysia. A knowledge building team was put together with several different groupings working together with different levels of participation. The core team conducted the interviews, while the supporting members and partner organizations were involved in the consultation process, analysis and provided support for the team. There were concerted efforts made to share the information garnered at the Musawah training at the national level through workshops and seminars.

Core team

The core group conducted the interviews. This included the coordinator and some members of the Advocacy, Legal and Public Education (ALPE) Program. In addition, one member of the Polygamy research team is also in the core interviewing team. Initially, it was planned so that more SIS staff members were involved in the interview process, but due to their work commitment, they were not able to conduct the interviews as planned.

Name	Area of focus
Rusalina Idrus	Project coordinator
Suri Kempe	ALPE Manager
Azrine	Public Education
Wan Zumusni	Academic, Polygamy researcher (university lecturer)

Supporting team members

The supporting team members included all the staff at SIS and Musawah in Malaysia. For example, staff members provided input and contacts for potential resource persons. They also helped in the coordination of seminars and forums related to the life stories project. SIS staff members, and Musawah staff in Malaysia, participated in the methods workshop, reading circles, as well as study sessions for this project. Aside from staff and SIS members, we also had individuals and representatives from partner organisations involved in some of our activities. For example, a counsellor from WAO (Women's Aid Organisation), <http://www.wao.org.my/> and a university lecturer from Gender Studies Department provided support to the core team during the methods workshop. In the final analysis workshop, a representative from AWAM (All Women's Action Movement) <http://www.awam.org.my/> participated in the discussions and reflection process.

Partner organizations

During the past year and a half, the Life Stories Project engaged with partner organisations with which SIS has existing working relationships. Examples of this are women as the single-mothers organisations, women who have gone through SIS training and in touch with SIS, other women's organization such as WAO and AWAM. We included our partners in our capacity building activities, such as reading circles and study sessions. We also consulted with the different organisations to introduce the project and to solicit input from them. We made a conscious effort to select our resource persons from within the circle of our partner organisations, to ensure that resource persons are within an existing support network.

Supporting organizations/individuals

We worked with a network of individuals such as with filmmakers, translators and writers in shaping the outputs of the project.

Project timeline

Date	Activity
April 2012	Musawah Methods Workshop in Bali
April –May 2012	Consultation process with SIS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introducing project and objectives, the methodology -Identify gaps in the women’s movement - Identify criteria for resource persons -Identify possible team members -submit research proposal to Musawah
June-August 2012	Consultation with supporting organizations and partners (e.g. WAO, AWAM, JAG, GAHWI etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introducing project and objectives, the methodology -Identify gaps in the women’s movement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Suggestions of resource persons -Identify possible team members -Identify supporting research associates e.g. Counsellor (for team/RP)
4-5 June 2012	National Workshop on feminist methodology
June –Dec 2012	Reading Circle and study sessions (monthly)
26-27 June	Seminar with Ziba Mir-Hosseini
July 2012	Finalized Research Plan submitted to Musawah
August–Sept 2012	Developed research tools and documents for interview process (consent form, confidentiality form, hand-outs, matrix)
Sept–November 2012	Phase 1 of interviews
November 2012	Public Forum: Challenges and Possibilities: Equality in the Muslim Marriage (Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Maznah Mohamad, Ratna Osman)
November 2012	Reflection and analysis of phase 1/ debriefing Identify challenges and further needs
November 2012	Midterm Musawah progress workshop
Dec 2012 - July 2013	Phase 2 of interviews
January 2013	Analysis workshop 1: preliminary analysis
Aug-September 2013	Transcribe interviews, write-up narratives

20 September 2013	Analysis workshop 2 (with Nur Rofiah)
July-December 2013	Development of outputs
January 2014-ongoing	Project report and continued development of outputs

Project Implementation

Preparation of research plan

The Life Stories coordinator prepared a research plan for the project, and, through consultation with others at SIS, a legal map of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in Malaysia.

We also identified the team members and a list of potential resource persons. Several participatory meetings were held to shape the project, and to identify the criteria for the resource persons. These were submitted to Musawah and used as a guiding document for the project. In addition, we prepared materials for the documentation process such as an information sheet on the project and on *qiwamah* and *wilayah* (in BM) to be shared with the resource persons, consent form, confidentiality form, illustrations and other research tools. A funding proposal was submitted to Musawah for a Seed Grant in June. We were successful in our application and received USD3,000 to start off the preliminary project activities.

Selection of resource persons

Resource persons were selected guided by the following criteria:

- Stories illustrate contradiction between the *fiqh* concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and lived realities
- Stories illustrate the issues addressed in SIS' advocacy work (MFL, Anak tak sah taraf, Polygamy, Child Support Agency, Telenisa)
- Compelling life story
- Illustrates the most pressing issues within the current political context
- RP is within a support network (e.g. Telenisa, GHAWI)
- Include marginalized voices (rural, lower income, disabled, indigenous, East Malaysians)
- Diversity in marital experience: Dual income vs. single income, stay at-home husbands, happy relationships

Life stories methodology workshop

We organized a Life Stories Methods Workshop on 4-5 June 2013 for the Life Stories team and for all SIS staff. We shared the training from the Musawah Bali workshop with SIS staff and adapted the material to suit our local context. The session included: ethics of research and informed consent, the life stories feminist methodology, interviewing and note-taking skills, emotional well-being of resource persons and interviewers. In addition to sharing the training from the Bali workshop, we also invited an academic, Dr. Shanthi Thambiah to discuss research ethics, and a counsellor from WAO conducted a session on emotional well-being. The workshop received very good reviews from the participants, in particular, the sessions on interviewing skills, research ethics and emotional well-being ranked high among the participants. Many also cited that they enjoyed the participatory nature of the workshop. One participant commented that all activist workshops should be conducted in this way. 18 people participated, mostly SIS and Musawah staff.

Interviews

The team conducted 8 interviews but we decided to focus on the 5 included in this report, as they were the most complete. We initially aimed to conduct 12 interviews, but some of the team members were not able to complete their interviews due to other work commitments. Interviews were conducted from the time period of September 2012 to July 2013.

Analysis

a. Preliminary analysis workshop, 11 June 2013

We organized a preliminary half-day Life Stories Analysis Workshop for the Life Stories team and for all SIS staff. The Life Stories coordinator shared the methodology learned during Musawah mid-term review and we tested it on two stories. The participants found the workshop useful as a review of the life stories project

and methodology. New staff members said it was useful for them in understanding the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*.

b. Life Stories analysis workshop with Nur Rofiah, 20 September 2013

We organised a Life Stories Analysis workshop with the following objectives:

- 1) To gain an understanding of the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in Islam;
- 2) To examine the lived experiences of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* in the Muslim family by analysing women's life stories; and
- 3) To explore the use of life stories for collective learning and advocacy, Dr Nur Rofiah from the pioneering Indonesian *qiwamah* and *wilayah* research team (and also representing ALIMAT and Rahima) was invited as a resource person.

Dr. Nur's presentations were the highlight of this workshop. Rusalina also presented on the sessions pertaining to women's ways of knowing. Participants gained an understanding of the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and the theory of women's ways of knowing. Participants also gained an appreciation of different tools in analysing life stories. One participant commented, "Excellent workshop – engaging, thought-provoking [and] fun". 28 people attended this workshop.

Capacity building

In addition to the methodology workshop and analysis workshop, the life stories project coordinated the following seminars and workshop as part of our goal in building capacity and knowledge on the subject of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*, and equality in the Muslim family. We also organized monthly reading circles for SIS staff and members.

a. Seminar: Muslim legal tradition and the challenge of inequality resource person: Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 26-27 June 2012.

An intensive two-day seminar on women's ways of knowing and the concepts of Islamic feminism and *wilayah* was held in June 2012. The workshop was well attended by a diverse group of participants including SIS staff and members, academics and NGOs, in total 60 participants. There is much interest in the subject matter and participants found the material illuminating for their personal interest and advocacy work. Based on the written evaluation, the seminar was a huge success with many participants asking for more similar type of seminars in the future. Aside from Ziba Mir Hosseini, Ratna Osman and Zainah Anwar also presented at this seminar.

b. Public Forum: Equality in the Muslim Marriage Challenges and Possibilities. Speakers: Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Maznah Mohamad and Ratna Osman. Moderator: Rashidah Shuib, 7 December 2012.

We received positive participation and feedback for the public forum with 77 in attendance and with many new to SIS events. The public forum provided a space to discuss the issue of gender equality in the Muslim family. The public forum garnered much interested and discussion via live-streaming, and you tube channels.

c. Reading circles

The wide range of material selected for the reading circles have included papers on *qiwamah* and *wilayah* commissioned by Musawah, academic publications and newspaper articles. Beyond a discussion of the reading material, the reading circles have also provided a space for sharing and reflection among SIS staff and members. In the October session, for example, we discussed personal life stories of transformation in our own understanding of Islam and Islamic law since joining SIS, and how our personal experiences are useful insights in our outreach and advocacy work.

Five Reading Circles were held in 2012:

1. Rethinking *Qiwamah* and *Wilayah* (30 May)
2. Contextualising Feminist Engagements in Malaysia (19 July)
3. Islamic Law, Women's Rights, and Popular Legal Consciousness in Malaysia, Part 1(27 September)

4. Islamic Law, Women's Rights, and Popular Legal Consciousness in Malaysia, Part 2 (24 October)
5. Equality in the Muslim Marriage (21 November)

d. Musawah global learning circle

The Musawah Global Coordinator for the Life Stories project organised a monthly reading circle for the Life Stories to foster exchange among the Life Stories teams from 12 countries involved in this project. The Malaysian coordinator participated in the online meetings including leading discussions for several sessions. We were also invited to submit an article summarising the Life Stories activities in Malaysia which was published in the Musawah newsletter for October 2012. The Malaysian team benefited from these discussions and resources shared in the forum. Some of the readings from the Global Learning circle were used and shared at the Malaysian level reading circles.

Life Stories

Life story #1: Nadia

At the time of the interview, Nadia was 32 years old and had been married for six years. She is a young mother with three children aged seven, five and two. Nadia is the breadwinner in her family, and her husband stays home to take care of the children.

Rebellious childhood

I grew up in the suburbs in a middle-class family; my parents both worked for the civil service. I was the second in the family of three girls. It may seem silly now but when I was younger, I wanted to be Barbie. I wanted to be the perfect model. I was always dieting and very conscious about my body image. I was also very materialistic and fashion-conscious. I would only buy “branded” clothes.

My father was traditional in his viewpoint and was very strict with us kids. He was the clear head of the household in our family. He made all the important decisions. When I was younger, I always questioned why, in the stories we learned in religious class, all the heroes were men. I often wondered why there couldn't be stories about women being leaders and doing brave things.

I looked up to my mum as a role model in my life. I can relate better to her and I have great respect for her. My dad was very strict and religious, and we never really connected. I remember when I was in primary school, someone gave me pencil box with a cute picture of a dog on it; it was Bob the Dog. My father got very angry when he saw it. He would not let me keep the pencil box. I was a kid and I did not understand why he was so upset over a pencil box. What was wrong with Bob the Dog? It was my mum who gently explained to me why my father would not let me keep it. That was how it was in my family. My mother always took the time to explain things to us.

Finding meaning through art

My time at university changed my life. I studied Fine Arts at the university. For an art class, I studied the great Masters and I was struck by the fact that art can say a lot about society. One message that I read in the artwork we were studying, was that there was a lot of suffering out there; people suffered. This really changed me as I started thinking about the world outside of myself. I began to question what I believed earlier.

I hung out a lot with the punk kids and the *mak nyah* (transgender) community at the university. I did not really fit in with the other Malay girls at the university. I smoked and stayed out late; I did not cover my hair. I became known somewhat as a “troublemaker.”

I was also introduced to feminist ideas while in college, through art. For my final project, I deconstructed Barbie using feminist theory. After college, I continued to hang out with the artsy and activist crowd, who further influenced my thinking. I met my husband who was also an activist when I was 24 years old.

My husband was different than other men I knew at the time. Because of his activist background, he was respectful of women and had feminist ideals. I learned a lot from him and we constantly discuss issues of gender relations.

Father's secret

When I was 28 and already married with two kids, we found out my father was in a polygamous relationship. At that point, he had been married in secret for four years. In fact, his second wife's house was just ten minutes away from my mother's house. We found this out from one of my father's relatives.

When we learned this, my sisters and I were frantically texting back and forth. We were upset and angry. We were also mad at our uncles and aunties as they knew but chose not to tell us all these years. We

confronted them on this and they admitted they kept it a secret because they did not want to anger my father. My father did have a reputation for having a horrible temper. Everyone was afraid of him.

My father got word of us discussing about him behind his back and was angry. He came back home and smashed our family pictures. He demanded we all come home for a family meeting that night. My three sisters and I had a face-to-face with our father. My mother was there too. I asked him, what was the reason he had to marry again? Who was this woman? My father told us she was the same age as my eldest sister. My sister was so angry when she heard this. She asked my father, "If our husbands had gone off and married a second wife in secret, would you be able to accept it?" My father said no, that would be unacceptable.

That made us angrier. That was typical of my father. He was full of ego. It was okay for him to do that to my mother but it would not be okay if his sons-in-law did the same. He had the right to make such decisions, but no one else.

He tried to argue that for some people their *rezeki* (blessing) was to gain wealth while his *rezeki* was to get a second wife. He tried using religion to get us to accept his action. He told my mother that, as a wife who accepted being in a polygamous marriage, she would be bestowed the *payung emas* (golden umbrella) in heaven.

I was so angry with him; he should have at least had the courtesy to tell mother. He admitted that he was wrong keeping it a secret for so long. I pushed him again, "Why did you need to marry again?" We were not an unhappy family. We were a normal family— on weekends we would get together and sing karaoke and eat together. The only thing he could say was, ".....she is young." I couldn't believe he said that.

My mother was mad. "so you say I am old and wrinkled? You know people at work all say that I am beautiful!" Indeed, my mother was an attractive woman. She was very fashionable and she took good care of herself. My father said, "You are more beautiful than my second wife, but I cannot deny God's *rezeki*."

My father told us children, "If you cannot stand me anymore, you can just leave." I told him that, of course, the father-child bond cannot be broken but we are all human and we were angry; we needed time to deal with this. Throughout this conversation my sisters were crying. I made a deal with my father that day, I told him I had no choice but to accept his betrayal but I did not want him to introduce my children to his second wife. I wanted his other life completely separated from our family's life.

For the sake of my mother, we had to eventually forgive our father. But, honestly, to this day, I am still very angry. And every time I hear anything on the news regarding polygamy, I get very angry at the injustice of it all. My father knows that I am still angry with him until today.

I know my mother did consider getting a divorce after she found out about this. We had talked about it, but later she decided it was too late for her to completely change her life. She had grown children and grandchildren. Mother felt it would be too hard to explain to the grandchildren if she got a divorce. She decided to accept the fact that she was in a polygamous marriage.

I often ask my mother if father had mistreated her since marrying again, but my mum said he had not; she said she was the one who *buat jahat* (was bad), often reminding him of the situation.

My father—he seems at ease with things now; he just sticks to his schedule. If he is not taking religious classes at our house, he is at the other house. During *Hari Raya* (the Muslim new year), he will be with us in the morning but he will promptly disappear in the afternoon. We don't really care anymore.

Not to say I am lucky, but I thank God this had not happened when I was younger. It would have been more traumatic for us kids, I think. I would probably have gone off to be a junkie, living on the streets. It would have been harder for my mother too, as at the time she had a smaller salary. Now she is a little more senior in her workplace and so she is more financially stable. She also has business ventures on the side now. She is very independent. Recently she went to *umrah* (mini-pilgrimage) with just her friends. She plans her social

life on her own—I guess it is her way of accepting the situation; she is no longer dependent on my father. In fact, she pays for all our vacations, and for all the expenses for the house.

She wasn't always so strong. When she first learned about my father's infidelity, she was shattered and depressed. There were days when she just disappeared from the house. She was in a bad state then. Like us, she too had to learn to adapt to the new situation.

Marriage—a joint responsibility

In our family, I am the one who goes out to work while my husband stays home to take care of our children. My husband does feel bad that he is not able to support the family but we believe that our *nafaqah* (maintenance) is *rezeki Tuhan* (God's blessings). God gave more *rezeki* to me so whatever I have, we share. The house rental and groceries I pay for with my monthly salary. My husband sometimes is able to take on freelance work and that contributes to our household.

My husband and I do not think of our marriage in terms of the “responsibility of a husband” and the “responsibility of a wife,” to us it is the responsibility of a household. We try to break these boundaries—things that a wife should do, and things that a husband should do. Marriage is about keeping things in harmony. It is about keeping our house clean and maintaining a daily routine.

We decided early on in our relationship not to have this concept of “your responsibility” versus “my responsibility.” One cannot have equality in the house if we have this mentality. We are in it together. We try to teach this to our children too. After they eat, they have to take their plates to the sink. This is what my mother taught us children too.

Parents work hard to put food on the table; as children, you have to do your part as well. My husband and I often talk about this even since my pregnancy. I noticed early on my husband was different from the other men I knew. He would cook and clean, things I used to consider women's jobs. We discussed how it would be once we have a family. My husband embraces feminist ideas with his activist background. With the children too, he often discusses gender roles.

It is still a work in progress. In the early days, I used to come home tired after a long day at work; I did not do any housework and I would go to bed early, as I put the kids to sleep. My husband was upset as I did not help in taking care of the house. We had a discussion about this, He said, “You talk about equality at work but you treat me like a slave here.” I realised what he meant and I tried to adjust so that I also chipped in with the housework.

I know how hard it is for him to take care of the kids for eight hours straight. These days, our two-year old is a handful— he is in his “terrible two's” phase. I understand my husband needs his time alone too. I try to help by cleaning the kitchen before I go to work and I do what I can when I get home. My husband likes it so the kitchen is clean before he cooks. He is a good cook but he is messy. I think it is fair—when he cooks, I clean, and vice versa. I am more particular about cleaning too, so I prefer to do it.

Aside from taking care of the children and cooking, my husband does the laundry. He enjoys spending time with the children. Now the kids like to help him hang the laundry— they do that together every day. We try to lead by example so our children will also learn from us. It is not all easy, but we continue to work at it.

Life story #2: Mimi

Childhood

I was born in Kedah in 1942. My father was a teacher and my mother was a housewife. We lived in a small town near Sungai Petani. My father was previously married before marrying my mother. His first wife died leaving behind three daughters. Then my father married my mother and they had five more children. I am the eldest of my father's second marriage.

When I was seven years old, my father was transferred to the town of Alor Setar. That was where I started my schooling years. First, I was in the Malay school until Standard Six. Then I went to the Malay special class for two years and then to the English secondary school. Among my siblings, only my sister and I went to the English school. It was not a common thing to go to an English school. Some people say you are a "Christian" for going to an English school. In the morning, I went to the regular school and in the afternoon, I went to a religious school to read the Quran.

I don't usually tell people this but I guess I am from a "broken family." After having five children, my mother was not well. So, my father married again. He married again because my mother was ill. You know, people back then, if they were unwell, the husband marries again. They get married and have more children. With three mothers, there were seventeen children.

Among the seventeen, you could say I was my father's favourite. My sister and I—the other one who also went to English school with me—my father always deferred to us. If the other siblings were in a quandary, he asked them to consult with us. He respected our opinions. My father was strict but he was not overly religious. He was the head of the family but we were closer to our mother. My mother was very quiet; she was the soft-spoken housewife focused on taking care of the children and husband.

I finished schooling in 1959 after Form Five and started working in Sungai Petani. At the time, it was very easy to get a job with such qualifications. My father was transferred back to teach in Sungai Petani and we all moved with him. I lived with my mother, brothers and sisters. My father lived with his other wife and children in the teachers' quarters. I often became the go-between between my mother and siblings, and my father. I was the one who would ask him if we needed anything.

I worked as a clerk in the Education Department. There were very few women working at the time. People sometimes stared at us when we went out to work. We were stylish and "modern." I used to wear long skirts and perm my hair. I had very curly hair and wore red lipstick.

I was very happy when I was young. When I got my salary, I spent it on my brothers and sisters. Whatever I had, I gave my mother. Even though I did not make that much, I still gave them most of what I earned. I would keep a small amount for savings and the rest was for my family.

Marriage and divorce

In the late '60s, I met my husband at a house party. In those days, we did not go out to party. We had them in our houses. We would invite friends and family and have a good time together. My husband was a school teacher back then. We married in 1968 and divorced in 1984.

The failure of my marriage was a surprise to me. We were happy, and had a good life, I thought, at least. Then one day he went out of town and did not take me with him as usual. Apparently, he went away with another woman. When he came back, someone told me my husband was getting a second wife. I did not believe this person—my husband would not do that to me. But God wanted to show me the truth. The *hantaran* (sending of gifts) he ordered for his secret marriage was wrongly delivered to my house. Words cannot describe how I felt that day. My world collapsed. I really did not expect this to happen to me.

I prayed for Allah to help guide me in making the right decision. My first instinct was to ask my husband for a divorce, but he refused. I ended up staying in a polygamous marriage for four years. I tried to be patient, as patient as I could be. But how long could I live this way? You would not have recognised me if you saw me at that time. I cried all the time, and often I just sat staring into space. I was very depressed. Every night

I asked God, is this how my life is supposed to be? Can I survive such a life? How long do I have to live like this?

I finally decided I needed to get out from this relationship. I stayed to save my marriage and my family, but I could not pretend any longer. I just couldn't be in a marriage like this. I was miserable. This was not the life I wanted to live.

I told my children I was getting a divorce. My children told me, "It is okay, mama, do what you think is right." What is money? What is a big house, if your heart is hurting all the time? Every time I saw him leave the house—oh, I couldn't.... I couldn't take all that.

It was hard to be on my own, but I was happy. I just focused on my career and my children. I focused on my health. If I was sick, my children would get sick too. If I messed up, I may lose my job, and my children will have nothing to eat. That was what I was thinking about after the divorce.

During my time, there was no *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) court. You go to the *Pejabat Agama* (Religious Department) to get a divorce. I had no lawyer. I did everything on my own. My husband refused to divorce me, at first. The officer at the *Pejabat Agama* advised us to reconcile. But, I said no, I cannot. I asked for *khul'* (a woman's right of cancellation of her marriage). I paid one *ringgit* (Malaysian dollar) for *khul'* and got my divorce.

After I got divorced, people were saying all sorts of things about me. They said I asked for a divorce because I wanted to be with another man. It is fine; they can say anything they want. They were not going through what I was going through. I just accepted it.

When I was going through the divorce process, I did not tell my family. After the divorce was finalised, I finally told my parents. They were shocked and not happy with my decision. I did not rely on my family for support during this. I just focused on taking care of my children on my own. I just asked *Allah* to guide me on the right path. That's it. *Alhamdulillah* (Praise to God).

Allah continues to guide me until today. I knew I was doing the right thing for me. What was the use of living in a big house and having a lot of money when your heart was always hurting?

The woman he married—I knew her well. She worked in my husband's office. I was nice to her. I was nice to everyone in his office. Why did she do this to me? Why? Why she must do this to me? She's a woman and I am a woman.

Through it all, I talked to God often and I asked God, is this what my life is to be? God told me, I give you the best. It is better for you to leave. That gave me strength to make the decision to leave the marriage. Why stay in a marriage and pretend everything is fine? Why do that?

Sometimes I wonder what I have done wrong that he had to look for another wife. I had given him four beautiful kids. I never betrayed him. I was always supportive of his career. Why did he do this to me? Why? Until today, I wonder, was she better than me? Or, maybe, because she was younger than me?

From Bangsar to Keramat

After the divorce, I moved out from my husband's house in Bangsar to a rental in Keramat. It was a big move for all of us. We had a comfortable life in Bangsar. I was used to a high standard of living, and then suddenly—*pap*—I fell right to the ground. I really had to adjust my life again.

My children too, it was a hard transition for them. They had a happy life before; they got whatever they wanted, and then suddenly we were struggling. My eldest was 15 at the time and the youngest was only nine. At the time, my husband did not provide us with anything. I brought up the children on my own with

my small salary. I told my kids, if you want to live with mama, this is the life. If you don't want this, you can live with your father. They all wanted to stay with me.

You know, when we were in Bangsar, we had a luxury car and a driver to drive us around. Now, my children and I had to take the public bus. To make ends meet, I started to do some part-time work selling cosmetics and household products. I sold everything under the sun. Life was a struggle then.

When the children were older, my ex-husband took them back in with him. He was doing well in his career and had more money. He sent our sons to Australia to go to school. During these years, I saw little of my children. We kept in touch, but my husband kept them away from me. I would drive all the way to the airport when they were flying off, and I would just wave to them from afar. When they flew back I would make sure to be there to welcome them. But I stayed back, as I did not want to interact with my husband and his family. Even if I could not talk to them, I wanted my children to know I was always there for them. I remember driving my old car and crying all the way home from the airport.

I have a good relationship with my children now. When they graduated, they all looked for me. They are all married, except for my youngest son. I visit them from time to time. But I choose to live on my own as I like my independence.

My ex-husband has since passed on. On his deathbed, he asked to see me. I think he felt guilty about the way he treated me. He asked for Mimi. Where is Mimi? I want to see her. I was at the hospital at the time, accompanying my children, but I stayed in the lobby. I refused to see him. My daughter told me, father wants to see you. But I just couldn't, I can't. What he did to me. I can forgive but I cannot forget.

Activism

In 1993, I started being involved in helping other single mothers. We started a support group with the help of Dr. Wan Halim, a sociology professor. We would get together and introduce ourselves and tell our stories. If you were not feeling brave enough to tell your story that day, you just listen at the back. Maybe next week, when you feel braver, you can share your story. That was how we worked. We listened to each other and supported one another. We also tried to motivate each other. We met once a month. We became like a family, helping each other. If someone needed to go to a government office or to go to the bank, we found a volunteer to go with that person for support.

Initially, I started working part-time with a government agency to help single mothers. When I retired from government service in 1995, we started an association for single mothers. At the time, single mothers were called *janda* (widow or divorcee)—it had a lot of negative stereotypes. We came up with the term *ibu tunggal* (single mothers). We became known as the *persatuan ibu tunggal* (association of single mothers).

I am still active in the single mothers' groups. I also help others set up support groups in their own communities. We don't have a lot of money but we don't really need that much.

We just get together and have a potluck. We just share what we have and listen to each other's stories. At each gathering, forty to sixty people would be there.

I am very grateful for everyone who helped us in the early years. Professor Wan Halim, Zainah and Sharifah, they helped me a lot. They were all very nice to me. They pushed and motivated me to continue with my work. When they organised courses, they invited me. I would always try to go as I was able to learn new things. I am very thankful to all of them.

But the *ulama-ulama* (religious people)—we did not get any support from them. We could not even get any *zakat* (tithe) money to help us with our program for single mothers.

Nowadays, there are many single mothers' groups but some of them, all they do is to have religious lectures. Learning religion is good, but, you know, the lectures are usually about what you can, and cannot do. They are not giving you ideas to help solve your problem. I think we have to help by giving the mothers input.

They need support; they need help in starting their life again. Sometimes it is very practical things about surviving day to day. But when it is all about religious lectures, the ladies can only listen and nod their heads. They need space to voice out their feelings and opinions. It has to be a two-way street. That is how I do it. When I am talking to you, you ask me questions. If I disagree, I will correct you. If you disagree with me, you can correct me. That is the way I support them.

By now, I have been involved in this for a long time. People know me—*Kak* (elder sister) Mimi, *Persatuan Ibu Tunggal*—and they still continue to call me for help. I meet with them, give them advice. Sometimes they really want to meet me face-to-face. I tell them to meet me at *Masjid Negara* (National Mosque). It is a very strategic location. It is near the bus depot and train station. They can shower at the *masjid* if they want to. I usually meet them around 11am. I don't have an office there; we just sit on the stairs of the mosque and talk. I will tell them their options: a, b, c, d. I tell them, you go back and think about it. If you have any questions, you can call me again.

After twenty years of doing this, I have to say I hear the same stories over and over again. The main problem is with women finding it hard to get a divorce. They have to wait years and years to get a divorce. Actually, a woman's rights are all in the *taklik* (marriage contract) when you get married. Everything is in the marriage certificate. Why is it so difficult for a woman to get a divorce? It is in the *taklik*. It says, if a husband does not provide for his wife for more than four months and ten days, you can get a divorce. Why do you need to get a witness and all that?

It is not easy for a woman to make a decision to go to court. They would have mulled over the decision for a long time. They think about their family; they think about people around them. And, most of all, they think about their children. Some even take ten years before they dare go to court. They suffer for a long time. It is not an easy decision. For me too, it was not an easy decision, but I had to do what was best for me.

I tell these women the same too. Do what is best for yourself. *Allah* will guide you for what is best.

Life story #3: Mawar

My name is Mawar (not real name), and I'm in my late 40s. I live in Kelantan with my husband and two children, a son (14 years old) and a daughter (19 years old). I work as a rubber tapper with uncertain income, enough only for food. I studied up to Form 5. Our family life when I was a child was not easy, so I had to give up my education and give the opportunity to my younger siblings to further their study. After finishing school, I worked temporarily at a factory in Gerik, Perak. However, it did not last long, not even a year. My father was not supportive of his children working away from the family; therefore, I had to come back to my hometown and help my mother to tap rubber. I never met my husband before we got married. We got engaged on *Eid Ulfitr* and were married on *Eid Uladha* in 1989. At that time, I was 23 years old. Our marriage was arranged by both sides of the family. We met the first time on our wedding night. The dowry was RM1000, and we exchanged 9 trays of gift. The expenses could be considered high at that time. In those days, the dowry for Kelantanese women was not fixed and was usually decided by the groom side. I gave birth to my first child, my daughter in 1990, after one year of marriage.

My family is not well-to-do, but I am happy and grateful that I have a good husband. He never even once scolded me, even though I had showed him with my anger many times. My husband came from a family that always spoils their sons. My father-in-law (husband's father) was not working and travelled to Singapore after his divorce (to my husband's biological mother). My husband was predominantly taken care of by his uncle.

Source of income

At the beginning of my marriage, I was not working and followed my husband, who was then working in Kuala Lumpur but we only stayed there for 3 months. After that, we returned to the village and continued our life in Ketereh, Kelantan (aunt's house). During that time, my husband and I will go back and forth between where we were staying, and my mother's house in Ketereh. At the same time, we started to build our own house with a capital of RM500. My husband and my father built the house brick by brick starting with the living room followed by the bedrooms and the kitchen. The house was ready within 3-4 months. It was built on my aunt's land. She lived in Ketereh and did not have any children and therefore had no problem with us building our house there. When I gave birth to my first child, my husband started to plant watermelon (the village variety, with lots of black seeds). Besides that, we also planted corn and rice-plant (in Ketereh), while waiting for the rubber tree to grow.

My husband also worked at the saw-mill near my house (500 meters away) since our son was 6 years old. In the saw-mill, his job was to stack-up the wooden boards with a salary of about RM100 a week. However, this wage was not fixed and stable as sometimes he would only earn RM75 – RM90 a week. Wages from tapping rubber in the plantation were less than RM100 a week. In 2007, my husband started planting watermelon as part of the wasteland restoration project (ACDAR). Our involvement in the project started with an application, in which my husband showed them the land title and it was then approved. We received government's aid such as wire, water drip (for irrigation), engine, a small tractor and an office that was built on the 6-acre land worth around RM46,000. The watermelons were planted only once a year. At first, we tried and planted it twice but it was usually unsuccessful. We then cultivated the watermelons in rotation with the pumpkins, but again, not on the same soil. After the watermelons were harvested, the land would be left for a certain period of time before we started the next cultivation.

Our harvests were always under the set target. However, when we first received the aid, the proceeds raised from the harvests were very lucrative. Previously, the government helped us in the preparation of seedlings, fertilizers and workers' wages. However now, we have to take care of it ourselves. Seeds cost about RM1500 for 3 cans, RM250 for a gunny-pack of fertilizer and we need around RM5000 of capital for one round of a cultivation process. Wages to "marry" the fruits and make plastic was about RM700 for 10 employees. This process of "marrying" the fruits was done every day for 15 days. The workers were paid a salary of RM15 an hour. When the time comes for it to be harvested, buyers (either from FAMA, or wholesaler) will come to collect the produce, and the proceeds were usually uncertain. If there were many fruits collected, the proceeds would also be profitable. Once, we made a profit of RM35,000 with government's aid. For the second year, we earned about RM15,000. When I was hospitalised for hypertension, the profit decreased

to RM10,000. Even then we had to use the money for my expenses as we had only a saving of RM700. After getting money from the produce, we could not save much because we had to use that money as capital for the next round. Money from the harvests was also used to buy a used second-hand Kancil car, and renovating the house (front porch).

Contributions in the household

Since the beginning of my marriage, I became the head of the family. You could say I contributed more to the family financially compared to my husband. With my income from tapping rubber, most of it went to paying the electric, water and Astro bills. I also paid for the children's expenses. The children felt more comfortable asking me for money than asking their father. The same goes with my mother. When I was a child, she was the one taking care of the family expenses, more than my father. Mother used her income from tapping rubbers and other village works (planting rice etc.) for household expenses even though my father was working at the saw-mill. Mother also became the head of the family when my father fell ill.

Fate decides everything. When my first child was 6, my husband became ill and had to be hospitalised for hernia surgery. Since then, I had to take over the responsibility as head of the family from my husband. He couldn't work for 4 years. I took job tapping rubber with a salary between RM600 to RM700. My income increased as most of the rubber trees were young and still producing a lot of latex. With this income, I assisted my husband, brought up my children, and became the head of the family.

In my opinion, the responsibility as head of the family should be shouldered by men. However, if they are not capable, there is nothing wrong with women taking over or helping them. That was why I took over the responsibilities when my husband fell ill. Since then, I was satisfied knowing that I can do any work independently, and I can live without a man. I don't think there are any differences when a man or woman became head of the family, because in my household, either with a big or little income, I can still support my family sufficiently. There was once a guy interested in me and asked me to leave my husband and be with him. For me, people may only see my struggle but they had no idea of what I was going through. When life was difficult (when my husband was ill), my father and younger brother helped us. They gave me some money for daily expenses (foods and drinks).

Distribution of property among the siblings

I was the third child out of nine siblings (3 boys and 6 girls). When my father died four years ago, we divided the inheritance left by my father equally and in good faith. The division was managed by my younger brother without following *faraid*, as mutually agreed by all the siblings. The 6 acres land (rubber plantation) was divided to 6 people, and the 3 acres paddy plantation was divided to 3 others. I used the other 6 acres of land for watermelon cultivation so that it won't be left abandoned. With the proceeds earned from the watermelons, we held a thanks-giving feast and prayers. My siblings never asked for their portion of the profit because they knew that it was not much anyway. Instead, we brothers and sisters gathered together, and the villagers were also invited to attend the feast. My younger sister who works as a nurse in Johor choose to give her proceeds from the sale of rubber to our mother.

The property was divided equally, and there was no discontentment arising between us until now. My brother who lives in Kuala Lumpur expressed his desire to sell his portion of the land, but changed his mind after being advised by other siblings.

Challenges as head of the family

As the head of the family, there were many challenges that I had to go through. One of it was when it was near to the festive season. I had to spend more to buy new clothes and special food for the festival. Same goes for the monsoon season, which usually started in October till end of the year. During this time, I could not earn much. However, after 23 years of experience, I am getting used to all this, even though in the beginning when my husband fell ill, it was very difficult for me.

When a woman became the head of the family, the surrounding society would have their own perceptions and reactions. Some questioned why I was supporting my husband, and some even asked me to apply for a divorce (*fasakh*). However, God is great. When my eldest was in Form 6, I fell sick and was hospitalised for

high blood pressure. From then on, it was my husband who took care of me for almost 10 months, when I couldn't even walk. Our daily and medical expenses increased up to RM1000 a month. We had to use proceeds from the sales of the watermelons to cover our expenses. Even though I was ill, I was not sad or worried. I believe *Allah* is just and know that I can go through it with patience and calmness. That was what kept me stronger until now.

I made decisions on my own mostly. I paid for the water and the electricity bills. Had I not paid for it, my husband would never pay. He had never bought rice for the house, and I don't think he even knows the cost of a packet of rice, because all this was done by me alone. He is hardly fussy about food and just eats whatever there is, without much care if the foods are nice or not. He is fine as long as the basic necessities are prepared. If I have not cooked when he came home, he will go out to eat. I am free to move around without having to ask permission from him. That is why I feel more independent and happy even though the divisions of responsibilities are not equal. Since the beginning of my marriage, till we had 2 children, I am free to go anywhere, buy and eat anything I like without asking him, as long I prepare the necessities for him (food). I bought everything in this house by cash. If I feel like buying anything, I will save my own money until I have enough to buy it. My husband bought the sofa with money earned from the watermelon's cultivation. He never washed his clothes or plates (not even one) after eating. However, he would help more in cleaning the area around the house. He also worked more at the plantations. He started planting in the plantation since 2008.

Supposedly, the responsibilities and the main role in the household are shouldered by the husband. In terms of Islamic law too, a husband must carry out the role. However, in my situation, my husband was not capable. Therefore, I took over the responsibilities. In this age and time, there are more women working compared to men. This is unfair, and men should change. The household aid should be given to wives, not just husbands. Same goes to the people aid (BR1M), which was given to men, assuming them to be the head of the family even though it was the wife that plays the main role in the household. Wives were not allowed to take BR1M money.

Influences in life

In my life, I am closest to my mother, and she influenced me a lot. Apart from that, my children, husband and sister-in-law helped too. I am very close with my sister-in-law who lives in Kok Lanis. It is a common thing in my family for women to work.

Life story #4: Wati

I am a mother of a very adorable daughter. She is now 8 months old and has started learning to crawl. It is such a blissful happiness to see her grow up in front of my eyes. Perhaps before I continue to tell you my story, I should tell you a little bit more of my family background.

I am now in my 30s. I have a brother who is a year younger than me. My father worked as a carpenter while my mother took a job washing clothes at people's houses. My parents' income supported the family just enough for food and clothes. If we need to spend a little extra, my parents would have to find additional work. This usually happens at the beginning of the school semester and during the festive season as there would be more expenses. Having said this, our family mostly lived moderately.

I was educated up to SPM in a religious school. I was even offered to further my study in Jordan because of my excellent results, but I rejected the offer because I don't feel it was the right field for me. Had I accepted it, I may have now been known as an *ustazah*!

After finishing Form 5, I started working. My parents cannot afford to send me for further study. At that time, I was still holding a PR status. I assumed it would be difficult for me to get any loan or scholarship for my education since I was not a Malaysian citizen.

It was different for my brother. He studied further and managed to pursue a diploma in one of the local private universities. I financed the cost of his education. I wanted my brother to have a tertiary education, even if it is just up to a diploma.

My father was a strict man and mother was very loving. Even though he was strict, he was much more loving towards my brother compared to me. Maybe my father didn't know how to show his love to his only daughter. And my brother, he is the baby of the family.

In our household affairs, my father was seen as the head of the family. All decisions were made and determined by him. Mother just had to comply without saying much. She has been like that for as long as I can remember. Her attitude and reaction towards my father somehow shaped my view of the opposite sex. That is why I still look up and respect my brother even though he is younger to me – because he is a man. My brother, on the other hand, has to protect my safety. These are the values that have been embedded in my family. Men have the priority and must be respected, while women have to be protected.

Even in school, the *ustazah* almost always emphasized that men are the leaders of the family. The responsibility to earn a living and support the family financially lies on the shoulders of the husband. The wife's responsibilities are to manage the house chores and take care of the children.

At home, I used to help my mother in household chores; cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the house and many others. Father and brother are usually in charge of the 'heavier' work; housework was handed in lock, stock and barrel completely to mother.

Teenage years & first love story

Teenage years is a time full of fun. This is the time when we started to get attracted to the opposite sex and perhaps also have our first boyfriend, or girlfriend. Even though I know it was only puppy love and it was not going to last, but by seeing other friends in a relationship, it made me also want to feel the same romantic feeling.

When I was in Form 5, I had a boyfriend. We were of the same age and were studying in the same class. But our relationship did not last long past form 5, after we both started working. I did my best to be faithful to him even when there were two or three admirers at my workplace. But, unfortunately, I found out that he got another girlfriend. When I confronted him, he denied it but in my heart, I just couldn't trust him anymore. We ended it then.

Love story

After the relationship had ended, I came to Kuala Lumpur with a broken heart, trying to find a job and move on. I worked as a clerk in a factory. There were many guys showing interest in me; some are single, but there were also those who were married with children! I treated all of them like friends, nothing more than that, but at the same time I kept searching for a man that can be my future husband.

Most of the single men I knew at that time didn't seem serious about being in a relationship. They were just having fun. But there was this one guy who took real good care of me. Let's just call him J.

J often asked about my well-being, and I felt he had all the criteria of a future husband I was looking for in a man. He would give me advice on my behaviour and appearance regularly. But, unfortunately, he was not single. J was married and had four children. Both he and his wife are 42 years old. Their children are aged 16, 14, 12 and 9. According to J, he was not happy with his wife. I didn't know whether I should believe him or not.

I tried to deny my feelings for J because I do not want to be in a polygamous relationship and hurt his wife. However, after repeatedly doing *Istikarah* prayer, I become surer that he is the right person for me. There was a 10-year age difference between us. I was confident that with his maturity and responsible nature; he would be able to guide me as a husband.

My family did not have a clue about my relationship. My mother did ask if I have someone in mind but I just brushed off her question. I knew that she would never agree with my marrying a married man and becoming a second wife. She often advised me to find a single man as she does not want me to be a reason for another woman's unhappiness. That is what she always reminded me whenever we talked about my future.

I know my mom was worried about my marriage. During Hari Raya, my friends would visit my family house with their husbands and children. Mother wished the same for me. She was anxious for me to get married and have children. I kept the secret of my love affairs with J safely, so mother would not suspect anything.

Attacked by J's wife

J was hiding our relationship from his wife. But how long can you possibly keep a secret? His wife finally found out about us. She called and abused me verbally over the phone with all kinds of bad words. This happened a few times, but she has never attacked me physically.

I was sad, but I realized that if I were in his wife's position, I would have done the same. But at that time, I was already too in love, and as the saying goes, all is fair in love and war. That was how much I loved J. J told me before that he would not divorce his wife no matter what happened, because he still loves her and his children. I had no choice but to accept it because I was sure J and I are meant to be together after receiving guidance from God through the *Istikarah* prayer.

We solemnised our marriage in Thailand!

After being together for 4 years, J finally decided to make me his wife. But our marriage had to be solemnized in Thailand because he does not want his wife to find out about it. Nobody knew about our plan to marry in southern Thailand. Everything was planned discreetly. The marriage arrangement was taken care of completely by J. I just agreed to everything though deep inside I was very scared, but I just pushed myself through it.

We went by car to Naratiwat, driven by J's friends. We left in the middle of the night and reached there at about 5.30am. Along the way, I kept praying for our safe journey and smooth process of our marriage ceremony.

Upon entering the Malaysia-Thailand border, we had to pass through a few roadblocks with armed army inspecting the vehicles. At every stop, I was extremely scared. I have heard about the bombing that happened quiet frequently in Thailand, hence the worry. *Alhamdulillah*, we reached safely.

We were married in the Naratiwat *qadi's* office. It was just like any other *qadi's* office in Malaysia. Before the solemnisation, I was asked to swear by holding the Quran that I was not anyone else's wife. With one pronouncement, we were affirmed as husband and wife. At that time, I felt very relieved and secured that I am now his legal wife.

Life as a wife

After we got married, J rented a flat for me. He also registered our marriage in Selangor Religious Office with a RM3000 fine for getting married abroad. My life as a wife begins. A second wife actually!

The only person I had confided about the marriage was my boss at the workplace because she was in the same situation as me. As we both are second wives, I felt comfortable talking to her about my life.

For over one year, J's wife did not have a clue about our marriage. J was very good at hiding it. With his job as a lorry driver, his wife knew that he had to always work outstation.

Usually J spent more time at his first wife's house so the wife won't be suspicious about him being polygamous. At times, I felt angry because he was not fair in his sleeping turns, but then I had to keep reminding myself that I am after all a second wife. I had to accept this fact!

In terms of maintenance, I can safely say that I contributed more for the household expenses, although J did give me some money. Every month, he will give me around RM500 to RM700. It depends on the needs of his first family. If they had more expenses that particular month, I would get less money from him. The reason being his first wife is not working and completely dependent on him while I am working and have a stable income.

My household expenses can be divided as the following:

- House = RM500
- Child Minder = RM300
- Groceries = RM300
- Child = RM200
- Others = RM200

After getting married, I could not afford to give money consistently to my parents like before. Sometimes I gave them some money, sometimes I didn't. Before I was married, every month I gave them RM100 without fail. However, my mother never complained because my brother was there taking care of their expenses and my mother got her own extra income from child-minding her relative's children.

Pregnant!

After two months of marriage, I found out that I was pregnant. This made both me and my husband very happy. I wanted to share the good news with my mom, to tell her and my father that they would be grandparents soon but I didn't have the guts to tell them that I'm in a polygamous marriage. I can imagine how devastated, angry and disappointed they would be so I just kept mum about my pregnancy.

Throughout the pregnancy I returned to my hometown for only 3-4 times. Mother was already aware about my working schedule and the difficulty for me to apply for holiday. She did mention that I was looking a bit plump, but I just replied by saying I eat a lot these days. Given my petite physique, mother can't really tell that I was pregnant even though at that time I was already in my 6th month.

Going through the pregnancy without having a husband by my side all the time made me bored. I did not have anyone to talk to, not family, relatives or even close friends. Once, I went out with my best friend when I was 4 months into pregnancy. She commented about my weight and I said I am happy, hence the weight was piling up. She did not have any clue about my marriage and pregnancy and did not suspect anything at such. She just said that is how it is when people are in love!

I will go for my medical check-up alone every month. I felt completely lonely doing all this routine by myself. There were once, J did not come home for 11 days because his first wife was not well. He only asked about my health and well-being over the phone and texted me every day.

My secret bubble burst!

After 9 months of complete pregnancy, the time has come for me to give birth. When I felt the contractions' pain, my husband was in his first wife's house. Thank God he answered my call and rushed home to take me to the hospital.

When I was in labour, my husband called my family and told them that I was seriously ill in the hospital. My parents and brother rushed to Kuala Lumpur immediately from Muar when they heard the news.

When my family arrived, J greeted them by introducing himself as my husband. He repeatedly apologised to my family and expressed his regret for marrying me without their knowledge.

My mother cried when she saw me and her newly born grandchild but she did not say much. I can see a hint of frustration on my parents' and brother's faces. I asked for their forgiveness. Mother said she had no other choice but to accept it, especially in my situation at the moment. She offered to take care of me and my daughter during the confinement period.

Acceptance of first wife

After 44 days of confinement period, I returned to Kuala Lumpur. Mother cried when we were leaving as she kissed her granddaughter. She told me to take good care of myself and my daughter and to give her a call if we need anything. I felt so touched that mother still accepted and loved me unconditionally even though I had hurt her.

There were 16 days left before I started work. One day J called me saying that my cowife would like to come visit our new born baby. I was startled and shocked and a little bit scared too. I have never seen her face to face before. Up to that day, I had only heard her voice cursing me over the phone and her photo that was shown by J.

When they arrived, J introduced his first wife to me. I shook her hand. Her face seems calm but I can tell there was sadness in her eyes. When she saw my little daughter, she broke down and started to cry as she kissed her. She said she gave in as there is no point for her to be angry now since we were already married and have a daughter. She did not want to separate the little child from her father. I could only stay quiet.

Taking the backseat as a second wife

Being a second wife, I realized that I must always give in and take the backseat. I got married without the first wife's knowledge and even though I knew he was married, I still went ahead with the relationship and married J in southern Thailand.

So I feel that in any given cases, I should give in. I was lucky that sister (that is what I called his first wife) is not attacking me any longer. J's children have also slowly accepted me though we are not really on friendly terms, but at least they respected me. With my in-laws, the relationship was just fine. Even J hardly visited his parents. They mostly just talk over the phone.

Regarding sleeping arrangement, J scheduled 4 days at Sister's house and 3 days at my house. But sometimes he forgets and does not adhere to the schedule!

In terms of maintenance, J gives priority to his first wife and older children who needed more expenses. Sometimes I would argue for my share of maintenance, but J would still take his first wife's side.

I just hope that my marriage will last and J can be the leader and protector for me and my child. Perhaps these are the sacrifices I have to go through as a second wife. May *Allah* SWT bless our marriage. Amin.

Life story #5: Lola

I am the oldest child of four. From the time I was born, my grandmother on my mother's side took care of me and I stayed with her until I was in 14 years old. Both my parents worked, but my mother would buy groceries for my mother and gave my grandmother money for my care. Mama and Papa would come and visit me on weekends.

My father was a businessman, relying primarily on government contracts. The Government is notorious for making payments late, and thus my father had no regular or fixed income. My mother, who worked in the private sector, would make most of the necessary payments to support the family. They understood the constraints my father was under, given the nature of his job. In that sense, they never really fit the stereotypical gender role mold.

Between them, my mother hardly cooked since she worked a 9 to 5 job. Instead, due to his flexible job hours, my father would cook and pick us up from school, and rally us to clean the house.

Even after my two younger twin siblings were born, they made it a point to distribute household chores equally among my siblings and I, even my brother! He had to take out the trash, wash the dishes, and clean the house, just like the girls. One time, his friends made fun of him and when we spoke about it, my father said to him that he should be proud of shouldering the equal responsibility. My father was also very proud of his daughters, and would often call us his queens.

We weren't like most families, and I could never recognise my family in any of the popular TV shows, where the father worked and supported the family, and the mother was home taking care of the children. When I was younger, I often caught myself wishing that I had a 'normal' family.

Nevertheless, looking back at it now, the idea of a man as the head of the household has its pros and cons. Men often feel automatically obligated to shoulder all the expenses. And if they aren't able to (for whatever reason) it hurts their ego, and if a wife contributes, it'll mess with their heads. They might resent it, and dismiss their wife's achievements. But my father wasn't like that. He was always proud of my mother, and felt no shame in telling other people about her contributions. That's what I wanted for myself.

For me, a husband and wife can share that 'head of household' position together. It all comes down to ensuring that the family is taken care of through '*halal*' means.

Tok Wan

My grandmother, Tok Wan, also shaped my outlook on family relations. My grandparents were married for a long time, and built their life together. They had land that they cleared together, and built a house on. They invested in their future together.

At least, that's what my grandmother thought until my mother's wedding day. On the day my mother married my father, my grandfather married another woman. As head of the household, he felt he had the right to give away the property he'd gained throughout his marriage with my grandmother to his new wife. It's unfair that men are regarded as a woman's guardian – Tok Wan used to laugh sarcastically when she thought of all the things she had done for my grandfather.

I saw how it affected my grandmother. She felt hurt and betrayed; it made her a bitter woman for the remaining 22 years of her life. I saw this as an injustice, and I swore to myself that I would always be financially independent.

Sharing a life

It was my upbringing though, that I think, has contributed somewhat to how my family is organised today. Zul, my husband, pays for most of our large expenses, including the car and the house. I pay for the maid, and set money aside every month for my mother. When it comes to our two children, we split the cost 50-50.

The reason I contribute is because of my own ego. As a woman, I feel like my financial contributions give me the legitimacy to have a say in household decisions. But I insist on contributing, even if that contribution is less than his. Truly, if it was up to Zul, he would work and I would manage all the finances. As a wife, I want him to share that decision-making responsibility. I also don't want to feel like I'm making decisions with his money.

This was the arrangement from the time that we got married. I sat him down and we decided from early on how we would split the cost of our life together, and we've always made it a point to discuss major investments or expenses. Even in the lead up to our wedding, we opened up a shared bank account, but continued to maintain our private accounts.

I wanted us to have the same understanding that my parents had. I admired my mother, who would bear with my dad when he didn't have his income. She didn't resent it, ever. But I also want to do the things wives traditionally do for husbands. I want to come home and cook for Zul, and take care of the children and the house. The difference is that it's a choice and he doesn't expect me to do it. I am proud that I cook for him, and sometimes I insist on cooking, even after a late day at work. And he respects that.

Societal expectations

When it comes to Zul and I, I've always been the outgoing one, the one that talks a lot. Zul's quieter. We talk and debate about many things, and I have different opinions from him since he's your typical Malay man. Once, Zul got annoyed with me and said "*apa yang aku cakap semua kau bantah*". So, for the next couple of days, I said "yes" whenever he asked me for an opinion – and he hated it.

I have a huge extended family and sometimes my aunties will 'tegur' and say, "you must listen to your husband, be obedient, etc." and I tell them "there's no such thing as hubby having a higher standing." They smile wryly and usually say, "*inilah budak-budak zaman sekarang.*"

My friends used to ask me too, "Are you sure Zul doesn't mind that you don't cook for him every day?" but that doesn't happen too much anymore.

It used to bother me, but not anymore. I've delved deeper into religion, and do my own research on what the Prophet (pbuh) really taught and said, and study these misogynistic *hadiths* and found out that many are in fact weak.

Analysis and Reflections

Analysis and reflections on the collected life stories (based on discussions during the analysis workshops):

1. Husband as protector and provider

While the societal expectation is that husbands are the main protector and provider, this is not always the case in real life. Many of the women we spoke to were their own protector and provider and in fact had to provide not only for themselves but also for their children as their husbands were not doing so. For example, Wati, had to provide for herself and her baby as her husband neglected her household. In the case of Mimi, she had to provide for herself and her children once she got a divorce from her husband. The husband absconded his duty to his children by not providing for their needs in the first few years of the divorce.

2. The role of family and community in reinforcing gender inequality

The women we interviewed felt they had to conform to certain ideals set out for them by family or the community, for example, to be married by a certain age, to be a good wife, and to allow for the husband to be the breadwinner. They felt unsupported and challenged when they wanted to go against the norm. In the case of Nadia's mother, she felt that she had to stay in the polygamous relationship, as she felt too old to start anew and felt embarrassed to be a divorcee. For Mimi, even though she eventually asked for a divorce and went on to be strong leader who helped other women, she still had certain ideals of the good wife that she still wonders what she did wrong that her husband married another woman.

3. Religion is used to justify conditions of inequality

Religion is often used to justify inequality in Muslim marriages. For example, when Nadia's father took on a second wife, he justified it as a God's blessing and told her mother she would be awarded in heaven for being in a polygamous marriage. In the case of Wati, she was willing to be a second wife, even though she knew the first wife was not agreeable to this arrangement, because she felt that her husband would be able to guide her in her religious education.

4. Polygamy, not a happy ending

In 4 out of 5 life stories, the resource persons experience polygamy either directly or via the experiences of their mothers or grandmothers. In all the polygamy cases, the women seem to suffer in the relationship. In the case of Wati, she was willing to be the second wife, as she felt that was better than not being married at all. She very much wanted to have a man to lead her as a religious guide and to become her protector.

5. Dynamics of parents' relationships

We observed that the dynamics of the parents' relationship have a strong impact on the resource persons' lives. For example, Mimi's mother was a long-suffering wife who experienced polygamy but quietly endured it in the role of the "good wife". Mimi also felt she had to be the "good wife" and agreed to be in polygamous relationship up to a point she could no longer be in that role. For Lola, the parents' equal partnership marriage influenced her views on marriage.

6. The State as (failed) protector and provider

Qiwamah and *wilayah* -based gender relations and inequalities do not only feature in husband-wife relationship or parents-children relationships, but also in many aspects of a woman's public life and the way her choices and access to citizenship rights are constrained. For example, the State put on controls on women (e.g. in her role as a wife) but does not afford them the protection e.g. in terms of rights to maintenance, rights to protection against polygamy. While Mimi had a quick divorce, many of the other women she helped had to wait for many years to be granted a divorce by the courts because of how the

system protected the men rather than the women. Many women also struggle to be able to get maintenance for their children, something that the courts could better enforce for the protection of women and children of divorce.

7. Financial Independence

Having the financial independence allowed the women we interviewed to be able to be more in control of their lives. For Mawar, her financial independence allowed her room for negotiation with her husband and created space for her independence. For Lola, it was important for her to contribute to the household as she felt more as an equal partner in that way.

8. Equality is possible in a Muslim marriage

In two of the life stories here, we see that equality is a possible in Muslim marriages. What it requires is a conscious decision between the husband and wife in seeing each other as equal partners in the marriage. This form of partnership is however not seen as norm and may have its challenges as it may be challenged by society. However, it is possible and provides a much more fulfilling relationship to both parties.

Planned Outputs

The Malaysian team has several outputs planned from the life stories project. We included planning for outputs very early on in our project design, as we wanted for the project to also have advocacy material that can extend the knowledge of the project beyond the team members and SIS. We also wanted to use the outputs in our advocacy work, in particular our fight for equality in the Muslim marriage. There are three main outputs that are in the process of being developed:

1. Animation

SIS has commissioned a filmmaker to produce a series of short animations that highlights some of the issues identified through the life stories interviews. The first draft of animation 1 is completed and we expect the final draft of animation 2 and 3 at the end of April 2013.

2. Documentary

A filmmaker has been commissioned to produce a film on the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* related to the local context. The production is on the way with the film expected to be completed in July 2014.



Animation film depicting equality in a Muslim marriage



Animation film featuring “Ustazah Adilah” who advises Muslim women on their rights.

3. Theatre

SIS is working with a theatre production house in producing a theatre performance that deals with the challenges in a relationship. The play is an interactive one that includes audience participation in one of the acts. The target audience for this performance are young people especially between the ages of 20-35. The first performance will be in June 2014 to coincide with another SIS sponsored event and subsequent shows to be staged in August 2014.

Appendix

Socioeconomic data

1. Demography

Malaysia has a population of 28.3 million people according to the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (Census 2010) carried out by the Department of Statistics Malaysia.¹ The census showed a sex ratio of 1.06 where the number of males outnumbered females. On the whole, Malaysia consists of 91.8% Malaysians, and 8.2% non-citizens. Malaysia's rich diversity is reflected in the percentages of different ethnic and religious groups in the country. The 91.8% Malaysians comprise Bumiputera (Malays and Orang Asal/Asli) that make up 67.4% of the total population; Chinese 24.6%; Indians 7.3%; as well as Others who make up 0.7%. In terms of statistics on religion, in Malaysia 61.3% of the population are Muslims, 19.8% Buddhists, 9.2% Christians, 6.3% Hindus, 1.3%, believe in Taoism, Confucianism and other Chinese traditional faiths; 1.0% Unknown; 0.7% No Religion and 0.4% Others.

2. Health

According to the 2010 Census, the average life expectancy is 77.0 years for females and 71.9 for males. UNICEF reports that the child mortality rate in Malaysia is 6.3 per 1,000 live births.² Also, WHO reports that the rate of maternal morbidity (maternal mortality ratio) stands at: 29 which amounts to 12-64 deaths per 100,000 live births.³

3. Education

The Gender gap report 2012 provides insight into the education levels in Malaysia. In terms of literacy, 91% of females and 95% of males in Malaysia are literate.⁴ Statistics on specific levels of education show that 96% of female and male children of primary school age are enrolled in primary school. Furthermore, 71% female and 65% male students of secondary school age are enrolled in secondary school. The Gender gap report also shows that university enrolment consists of 45% female and 35% males.

4. Participation in the economy

Malaysian women contribute a considerable portion to the nation's economy. The Labour Force Survey Report Malaysia 2012 reveals that 80.5% of workers in Malaysia are males (8.34 million working out of 10.36 million working age males) while 49.5% of workers are females (4.78 million working out of 9.65 million working age females).⁵

Interestingly, a higher percentage of women are working in the professional field compared to men. The Labour Force Survey Report Malaysia 2012 indicates that professionals in Malaysia are made up of 55% females (686,600 people) and 45% males (559,800 people). There are however, more males working as managers, as the report shows that 78.5% of managers are male (538,500 people) while only 21.5% of managers are female (147,700 people). Also, there are more males who are technicians and associate professionals, as these fields consist of 32.5% female employees (417,700 people) and 67.5% male employees (866,600 people).

Presently, more women are involved in informal labour compared to men. According to the Informal Sector Work Force Survey Report 2012, 8.94% females (427,200 out of 4.78 million female labour force) and 7.39% males (616,700 out of 8.34 million male labour force) are doing some kind of informal work in Malaysia.⁶

1 Census 2010, Department of Statistics Malaysia

http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1215%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010-updated-2972011&catid=130%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010&Itemid=154&lang=en

2 UNICEF. 2010. http://www.childmortality.org/index.php?r=site/graph&ID=MYS_Malaysia

3 WHO Western Pacific Region: Malaysia statistics summary (2002–present) <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.country.12900>

4 The Gender Gap report 2012.

5 The Labour Force Survey Report Malaysia. 2012.

http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1864&Itemid=169&lang=en

6 Informal Sector Work Force Survey Report. 2012.

http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2080&Itemid=169&lang=en

There are a number of female-headed households in Malaysia. The Malaysian Population and Family Survey 2004 Peninsular Malaysia recorded that 16.6% of households in Malaysia were headed by women, and these included women who were never married, married, widowed, and divorced/separated. In Malaysia, there is an issue of wage inequality among women and men. The Salaries & Wages Survey Report highlights that there is a gender wage gap of 3.6%, on average female earning RM1,838 and male RM1,906.

On the issue of employees' rights, female employees in Malaysia are entitled to state paid maternity leave and child care rights. A female employee is entitled to 60 days paid maternity leave and public day care with allowance. Those opting for private day care however, are not entitled to an allowance.⁷

On the whole, there is a higher percentage of unemployed women compared to men. The Labour Force Survey Report Malaysia 2012 shows that 3.2% females (151,000 people) and 2.9% males (245,300 people) were unemployed in 2012.

5. Business and land holdings

In 2012, 1.5% of Malaysian women had the status of 'employer', a term used for a person who operates a business, a plantation or other trade and employs one or more workers to help her.⁸ Additionally, 12.9% of Malaysian women had the status of 'own account worker';⁹ a person who operates her own farm, business or trade without employing any paid workers in the operation of her farm, business or trade.

Business has long been a field that has attracted the participation of women throughout the country. According to an UNDP report in 2007, 30.3% of women were working proprietors and active business partners.¹⁰ In 2000, there were 49,554 registered units of women-owned businesses, and the number increased to 54,626 in 2001.¹¹

Moreover, the Enterprise Surveys Database (<https://www.enterprisesurveys.org/portal/login.aspx>) 2013, managed by The World Bank Group, recorded that in 2007, 13.1% of manufacturing firms in Malaysia had female participation in ownership.¹²

The Food and Agriculture of the United Nations (FAO) reported that in 2005, women held 18.0% land holdings in Malaysia.¹³

6. Property rights and inheritance

In Malaysia, a woman's right to own property is accorded by the laws of the country. According to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, in relation to property ownership,

Generally, women in Malaysia have the same rights as men to own, acquire, manage and dispose of property and this does not change upon marriage. For both men and women,

7 The Gender gap report 2012.

8 Labor Force Survey Report Malaysia. 2012. Department of Statistics. Kuala Lumpur. Accessed at http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1864&lang=en (10 Jan 2014)

9 Labor Force Survey Report Malaysia. 2012. Department of Statistics. Kuala Lumpur. Accessed at http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1864&lang=en (10 Jan 2014)

10 UNDP. 2007. Malaysia Small and Medium Enterprises: Building An Enabling Environment. Cited in Teoh, WMY and Chong, SC (2007). Theorising a Framework of Factors Influencing Performance of Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia. *Journal of Asia Entrepreneurship and Sustainability* 3:2.

11 Companies Commission of Malaysia. 2003. Cited in Teoh, WMY and Chong, SC (2007). Theorising a Framework of Factors Influencing Performance of Women Entrepreneurs in Malaysia. *Journal of Asia Entrepreneurship and Sustainability* 3:2.

12 Enterprise Surveys Database. 2013. The World Bank Group. Accessed at <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org/Data/ExploreEconomies/2007/malaysia#> Cited in World Economic Forum (2013) *The Global Gender Report 2013*, Malaysia Country Profile.

13 Gender: Full Country Report Malaysia. Gender and Land Database. FAO. Accessed at <http://www.fao.org/gender/landrights/report/en/> (10 Jan 2014)

disposal of property requires the consent of the spouse only if the latter has share or interest in the property.¹⁴

Culturally however, males assume the role of the head of the household¹⁵ and in the past, have been privileged in land entitlement in land development programs.¹⁶

With regards to inheritance, for non-Muslims, the amended Inheritance (Family Provision) Act 1997 is gender neutral so that men and women have equal entitlements. Inheritance for Muslims is governed by *Shari'ah* law with male gender bias in inheritance shares. Muslim women can claim one-third (in some cases one-half) of the value of jointly owned land upon the death of a husband or, divorce.¹⁷

14 Malaysia: Report to UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. First and Second Report. 2004. p156. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. Kuala Lumpur.

15 Malaysian Population and Family Survey 2004 Peninsular Malaysia. p90. Lembaga Penduduk dan Keluarga Negara. Kuala Lumpur.

16 Ismail, Maimunah (1993). Women's Access to Land as Owners: Some Implications for Development Planning. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1:2 p101-113.

17 United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), "Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Malaysia, Combined Initial and Second Periodic Reports of States Parties". 2004. p 113. New York. Accessed at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/35sess.htm> (10 Jan 2014).