

CHAPTER TWO:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MALAY WOMEN'S POSITION
IN THE 20TH CENTURY

2.1 Introduction

Malay women's position in the 20th century faced various challenges because they experienced two phases of change; before independence and after independence. Women's role is oriented more toward family matters rather than self-fulfillment implying that when faced with a choice between career and family, family would always be given priority. In a way, the present Malay women are caught in a dilemma between the modern challenges of life and the Malay tradition. While many are now employed, they are still expected to be responsible for the family and to maintain the traditional perception of a Malay woman. Hence, this chapter presents the historical roots of Malay women's status in the 20th century, before and after Malaysia's independence. In specific, this study examines 'how' Malay women faced the challenges in politics, education, social and religious aspects in the Malaya.

Moreover, this chapter discovers the Malay women's activism and struggles for the emancipation of women in Malaya. The emancipation of women is generally meant as a liberation of women from any discrimination, illiteracy, conservatism, and traditional practices that have pegged women into one specific area mainly related to the private sphere. Therefore, in order for women to achieve better lives, many solutions have been sought including the right to seek education and the formation of girls'

schools as well as the establishment of Malay women's movement. Similarly, nationalism and feminism among the Malay women also emerged to promote social change in Malaya. This topic will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

2.2 The Status of Malay Women in the 20th Century

The status of Malay women in the 20th century differed during the colonial era and after independence. Consequently, this sub-chapter divides the status of Malay women in the 20th century into two different periods. The following section details a discussion of the variations in Malay women's status before and after Malaysia's independence.

2.2.1 Before Malaysia's Independence

Malaya achieved independence in 1957. Before independence, various events and circumstances befell Malaya such as torture by the Japanese, invasion by Great Britain, and the fight against Communist Party, and others. These events had various effects on the occupation of Malaya. In fact, women were also negatively impacted by the various events. This chapter examines the status of Malay women before the Malaysia's independence, namely from 1929 to 1957. This study explains the status of the Malay women from the aspects of education, politics, social and religious aspects.

The education system of Malay women before 1957 was divided into two main stages; before the arrival of the British (1400-1786) and during the British occupation (1786-1956). Basically, education can be divided into two types namely the formal education system and the informal education system. In the early stages, education

involved the transfer of knowledge and skills from parent to child (Anggraini & Oliver, 2019).

In the informal education system, Malay girls and women were given lessons or education at home, where they just learned things concerning religion and how to recite the Qur'ān. The religious lessons they received were mostly basic lessons that allowed them to perform prayers and uphold other pillars of religion. Most of this type of education was taught at home or held at the home of appointed religious teachers. Another form of basic knowledge taught was on the formation of morals and personality in preparation to become a good member of the society. In addition, mothers would traditionally train their daughters how to cook and do housekeeping before they get married.

This situation was very detrimental to women because women also need education just like men. The reformism fought for modernisation in the Muslim community in Malaya. They promoted education for women because they claim that a developed society depends on the progress of women. They also analysed the role of education in changing the Malays and the position of women at home and in the community. Furthermore, education should be given to girls because with education it will help women grow to be brave and independent. In fact, educating women can help expand their knowledge. Once a woman is educated, she will educate her children, the entire family will be educated and so the country will develop faster.

Education can bring fundamental change to the Malay community and improve the living standards of Malay women; Malay activists emphasise education and schools for girls. Girls' schools need to be built because male teachers do not know how to educate Malay women. The current school system was committed to accelerating the

development of Malays, but as long as women are not educated, progress and change will not happen. Hence, Malay women started to receive formal education at schools. They began to learn just like men, and in fact, they were also formally taught household knowledge and skills at school.

In addition, the phenomenon of women's involvement in politics is influenced by the Western culture (Mohd Nor & Mohd Zahari, 2012). Western women were actually still discriminated against by men in terms of wages and salaries at the time. Therefore, a movement began to rise demanding rights for women equal to the rights that men enjoyed. This movement is known as feminism. In the West, this Feminist thought and movement built a solid conviction that it has now become a dogma that 'nothing differentiates men from women, albeit naturally.' As a result, the West now considers that the right to universal suffrage and free suffrage are sufficient to eliminate discrimination in politics. Finally, women were given the freedom to be on par with men in various fields (Hambur & Nurhayati, 2019).

In Malaya, women took a bolder step by getting involved in a political candidacy election in 1952. This situation happened in the first local election in Kuala Lumpur held in February 1952. In the election, out of 32 candidates contesting for 12 seats in the Kuala Lumpur Town Hall, four of them were women. However, all four women were non-Muslim candidates. They were also the first women to participate in any election in Malaysia (Fatimi, 2017).

In December 1952, six more local elections were held in several states namely Melaka, Johor Bahru, Batu Pahat, Muar, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown. Of the 99 candidates contesting for 37 seats, nine were women and six were successfully elected. Two women candidates represented the United Malays National Organisation

(UMNO); Zahara binti Mohamed Talib in Batu Pahat and Fatimah binti Haji Yunos in Muar (Fatimi Hanafi, 2017).

Meanwhile, in the first election held on 27 July 1955, Halimahtun Abdul Majid won a seat representing the Alliance contesting in Ulu Selangor. Among the other candidates were Bibi Aishah binti Hamid Don (North Kulim) and Normah binti Kamaruddin (Sik-Gurun) in Kedah and Ramlah binti Dahlan representing Temerloh Selatan, Pahang. In addition, many more women who were contesting and won several elections after that, and received recognition by the surrounding community. This case indicates that women also have qualities of leading a community alongside men (Fatimi, 2017).

Furthermore, as for the status of Malay women in society, women at that time often faced the problem of forced marriage, polygamy, divorce, domestic violence, and so on. Women were viewed as useless objects in society. Issues of the humiliation of women became barriers to progress and social change when some Malay women also became 'hot issues' in magazines. Women reformers rose up to fight for women's rights in society (Muhammad Rahimi, 2017). Among the issues of female subjugation raised by these women reformers are forced marriage, underage marriage, formal education for daughters, polygamy, divorce, and domestic violence. Besides, women's modesty is rooted in irrational social systems, customs, and religious practices and is still plagued by ancient beliefs, superstitions, and heresies.

Moreover, the life and destiny of women at that time were controlled and determined by their parents before they were married off to strangers. The issue of forced marriage was seen as restricting the progress and freedom of women as human beings. In fact, women were silenced and denied the right to freedom of choice. The

parents would take charge of all the movements and lives of women. The influence of external culture was also a major factor for parents to restrict their daughters from socialising either in school or in society (Mahani Musa, 2010).

However, the arrival of reformers in Malaya significantly impacted the women, especially education-wise. As a result, women also began to study Islam more deeply. They began to embody and practice the religious knowledge they received. The status of women in religion also changed in line with change in the medical world. For example, Malay women would only accept treatment from female medical officers and refused to be treated by male doctors, even though they were in critical condition. This reaction, however, is considered typical of traditional societies that adhere to religious teachings advocating that contact between unmarried men and women is unacceptable. The British then appointed at least one female medical officer in hospitals and wards in each of the Malay states, such as Kuala Kangsar, Kuala Pilah, Kuala Lumpur, and Ipoh. Moreover, exhibitions involving the treatment of female patients, for example, also managed to attract more Malay woman to come to the hospital. In addition, the British also strived to provide separate wards for female patients, especially for the Malays (Mat Piah, 2014).

2.2.2 After Malaysia's Independence

The challenges of Malay women post-independence are greater than those of the women before. In the past, women worked hard to fight for their rights, but women today need to be more sensitive toward social issues and current developments, especially issues related to family institutions. However, women today no longer

function as mothers and wives alone; their role is now broader. Women nowadays are also employees, employers, and an active part of the community. In addition, the role of women is enormous because the future of their children lies on their shoulders.

Women in the 20th century modern society face a dilemma; in one sense, they are required to be obedient wives and mothers, but in another, they are also required to be educated and be a source of inspiration for their husbands and incite the male passion. New women of the 20th century are a changing group - smart and daring to demand equal rights with men and therefore, should not be treated as second-class citizens (Hanafi et al., 2015).

The involvement of women in the political arena is a situation that is not strange to today's society. For example, the first woman to be appointed as the Minister of General Welfare Malaysia is Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim, who held the post from May 20, 1969 until the end of February 1973, with other locals. Meanwhile, Tan Sri Aishah Ghani was the first Malaysian woman to be appointed as a Senator and the second woman in Malaysia to hold the post of Minister. In 1972, she was appointed as the Minister of General Welfare (Abdullah et al., 2012).

The presence of women in today's politics is a situation that is no longer strange to the local community after Malaysia achieved independence. Consequently, they continue to fight for this right because the colonial practice had left lasting impact on the Federation of Malaya (Saidon et al., 2017).

Women's status in the world of education in Malaysia has also undergone many changes after Malaysia's independence. Post-independence, women were given the same rights as men in education. After Malaysia's independence, focus of education in Malaysia was to unite all the races in Malaysia (Kementerian Pendidikan, 2013).

Women were no longer excluded from education. They were now constantly moving forward to build the country and drive its development.

In 1959, a Subject Review Committee was formed, known as the Rahman Talib Report. The committee was headed by the-then Minister of Education, Abdul Rahman Talib. The purpose of the appointment of this committee was to review the National Education Policy as proposed in the Razak Report made in 1956. Among the proposals put forward in the Rahman Talib Report was to make the Malay Language the main medium of instruction in all schools, including Chinese and Tamil schools (Zainudin et al., 2015).

The education system at this level was not only oriented towards the eradication of illiteracy but also to achieve the economic goals of the country. Among other goals to be achieved was the strengthening of the national education system to foster social, cultural, and political unity, provision of more systematic and comfortable educational facilities for students, improving the standard of education throughout the country, and implementing democratisation of education regardless of race or religion.

In an effort to compete with the most developed countries in the world, Malaysia must implement an education system that can produce a young generation that is knowledgeable, able to think critically and creatively, has strong leadership skills, and is able to communicate effectively globally. No less important is that every student in Malaysia needs to be inculcated with values, ethics, and a sense of responsibility as citizens, so that they can make the right choices for themselves, their families, and the country, and be able to face and overcome challenges.

At the time, the three goals of education in Malaysia were (1) To produce a loyal and united Malaysian nation; (2) To produce people who are faithful, virtuous,

knowledgeable, skilled and prosperous; and (3) To provide human resources for the needs of the country's progress and provide educational opportunities to all Malaysians.

The status of women in education no longer became a 'hot issue' after Malaysia's independence. Malaysians were beginning to realise the importance of women in the world of education, without which women in the country would retreat and be destroyed. This awareness has had a positive impact such that the women now bravely step forward to further their studies.

In society, the role and status of women post-independence, especially housewives and mothers, are no longer limited to being the house manager, but also as the main income generator alongside their husbands, which also adds value to the country's income and economy. If, in the past, women worked hard to fight for their rights, women today need to be more sensitive to current issues and developments, especially matters related to family institutions. Furthermore, women today no longer function as only a mother or wife but their role is now broader and include the role of employee, employer, and an active part of the community.

In fact, at this time, women also began to fight for their rights in religion. For example, Aishah Ghani, the leader of the largest Women's Movement in the country at the time, was responsible for proposing Islamic Family Law despite being criticised by some in UMNO itself as a 'misguided struggle' to try to change the Qur'an. Among others, Aishah was seen as trying to ban polygamy as legalised in The Qur'an. These challenges and criticisms were faced by UMNO's Women's Movement under her leadership and eventually a committee called the Committee on Tightening the Law on Polygamy and Divorce was formed in 1973. Among others, this committee set a minimum age of marriage of 18 years for men and 16 years for women. For anyone who

wanted to marry more than one, they would also need to get special permission from the *qadi*. The *qadi* will appoint a committee to investigate and consider the application. This effort was to ensure that Muslims entered the realm of marriage at a mature age to avoid divorce and to prevent women from becoming victims of polygamy (Mahani Musa, 2010).

2.3 Activism and Malay Women's Struggles for the Emancipation

This sub-chapter examines the evolution of Malay women's activism in Malaya and the type of social activity that they advocated to emancipate themselves. Both are seen as a crucial factor of Malaya's social and cultural changes. Women's activism groups encourage women to support women's education in addition to placing women in the economy and at the head of social change. Two efforts were taken by the women at this time to achieve emancipation: i), to educate and format girls' schools and ii), to establish a Malay women's movement. The sections below describe their efforts in more depth:

2.3.1 Education and the Formation of the Girl's Schools

Changes to ancient cultural changing and modernization can occur in societies when women are given education (Mahani Musa, 2010). Various efforts to transform and modernise communities were done via a movement called 'Kaum Muda', a group of Muslim intellectuals who graduated from the Middle East and Turkey who fought for modernisation and reform for the Muslim communities in Malaya (Arba'iyah, 2020). The movement promoted education for women because they believed that the societal development depended on the progress of women. They also encouraged women to receive education as a source of societal change, and change in the position of women in the home and society. 'Kaum Muda' published a magazine called *Al-Ikhwani* to

discuss and criticise the issue of women, religious practices, and conservative customs that deal with women, and men who want compulsory education for women. The women who supported the reforms by 'Kaum Muda' rejected the opinion of conservative religious groups that prohibited women from being given a formal education. 'Kaum Muda' was of the opinion that knowledge, which includes economic, personal, and political knowledge, is a right for both men and women (Abd Aziz Azmi et al., 2017). However, women should remain primarily responsible for household care and educating their children.

During that time, Malay girls and women received education at home. They did not receive formal education. They were more concerned with studying the religion and reciting the Qur'ān correctly. Moreover, they received basic Islamic education to apply and to perform prayers and uphold other pillars of religion (Hasnah, 2011). Most of this style of education was taught at home or held at the home of appointed religious teachers. Another basic knowledge imparted to women was the formation of morals and personality in preparation to become a good member of society. In addition, mothers would traditionally train their daughters to cook and do housekeeping before they get married.

Leaving women in ignorance is considered a great loss for the nation and the country. Zaaba (1998) mentioned that education for women is compulsory. Therefore, women should be given education similar to men because they are also humans and have the right to education and knowledge just like men. Zaaba also stated that education should be given to women because it will cause them to be brave and independent. In fact, education is not merely for getting a job but is also useful to expand the heart and the mind. However, according to Cheeseman (1948), the first attempt to

establish a school for Malay women was fraught with challenges, especially prejudices and conservatism from Malay parents.

However, only education can bring fundamental changes to communities and improve the lives of women in Malaya. Hence, Malay activists emphasised education and the establishment of schools for Malay women. Special schools for women had to be built because male teachers did not know the type of education needed by women. In fact, women quickly lagged behind the men when asked to study in class due to shyness with male teachers who teach them. The construction of schools for women was discussed by the Government in Kelantan. They discussed building a school committed to the development of Malay women, and that as long as women were not educated, progress and change could never take place in Malaya (Muhammad Ridzuan & Arba'iyah, 2014).

Moreover, women should be given education for the following reasons (Mahani Musa, 2010; Idris & Mohd Noor, 2014): i) women are responsible for educating their children; and ii) women should know the ways to help their husbands to complete their life together. To complete the basics, women must learn and learn adequate knowledge concerning health, education, housekeeping, and the social sciences.

The process of forming school for girls was slow in the beginning because parents remained prejudiced and worried about the safety of their children, namely going to school alone without their supervision. In fact, they would also lose their domestic helpers if their children went to school. They thought that skill-based classes such as sewing and cooking, could be learned at home, and the fathers thought that their wives could teach the same to their children at home. Furthermore, some parents also

questioned the importance of schools for girls, because they viewed it as better to develop them for men only.

Similarly, they were so concerned that the teachers would impart the Western foreign culture to their girls at school. Moreover, they also believed that schools were the centres of Christianity. These were some of the factors why Malay parents refused to send their girls to school (Mahani Musa, 2010). Zaaba was insulted by the society when he sent his two daughters to school in Tanjong Malim. His daughter was ridiculed by the local community and called a 'kitchen clerk'. They were also threatened because they were considered modern and practised a different form of Islamic teaching. Interestingly, Zaaba transferred his two daughters to Bukit Nenas Convent School after that (Mahyiddin, 2017).

To overcome the reluctance of parents to send their girls to school, teachers began to cooperate with the leader of the communities to persuade Malay parents to send their children to school. The teachers explained that the school taught affairs of hygiene and domestic work, rather than cultural civilisation education taught to boys. Several other efforts were also made to convince the parents to send their children to school.

In addition, spreading awareness of the type of education not only had to be done for primary schools but also the college level. Various suggestions were made including holding a debate on women's education in Kelantan. Among the most famous debates on this topic was one held in College Ismail Kota Bharu titled 'Is it Important to Educate Malay Daughters?' and 'How Can a Boy and a Girl Mix based on the Islamic Perspective?' (Hasnah, 2011). Debates on women's education were also held between Ibu Zain and Mr. Melur (Aljunied, 2018). The debate began when Mr. Melur suggested

that women should learn English in schools just like men to accelerate change and progress among women. Ibu Zain opposed this suggestion because Malay male teachers had begun to neglect the Malay language and such an act did not reflect love for the homeland or the nation. Meanwhile, Malay women teachers strove to promote the education of women by implementing religious education in accordance with the guidelines and code of conduct of the Malays. Ibu Zain, who pointed out that a safe road for Malay intellectuals involved in the modernisation and education was to stick to the principle of 'religious educated, modern defended', which showed the simplicity of this movement. At the same time, literature on this topic emerged that catapulted radical voices criticising the role and position of women in the communities at that time. This principle is closely linked to the ability of women to fight for progress and modernisation, while still not neglecting the principles of religion and Malay tradition. Ibu Zain rejected education or learning that followed the Western education style too much.

Indeed, education has been seen as an important requirement for women to learn about the concept of progress, which encompasses women's rights equal to that of men. Fathers were advised to give their daughters the right to education and to be impartial toward their daughters. Zaaba (1998) stated that the progress of a nation is related to the progress of women. Women should be educated but "not because we want them to be magistrates or government officials but simply to educate them in this world and the hereafter." A developed nation needs women who were equally responsible as men. Their energies, services, and ideas are required to manage a country, so that it becomes a peaceful and sovereign country. If women are still weak and backward in the struggle of life and do not want to stand upright with men, then, it is believed that the society and the country will not move forward, and will instead fall lame and weak. The

progress or backwardness of a society is highly dependent on the cooperation between men and women. Although various ideas and thoughts are shared between men and women, and disagreements are bound to arise, openly, it is considered a virtue to help achieve objective together. Women and men should not accept ideas or follow anything blindly without making rational judgments or referring to religious teachings. Women also have the opportunity to obtain views and advice from male activists who support women to get out of a culture that prevents them from thinking and becoming competitive. The women activists were determined to eradicate illiteracy and called on the Malay women to get involved and work together with men to develop the nation. Awareness of these 'new women' who were working hard to change societies through the acceptance of education and enlightening talks regarding religion. However, their ambitions and descriptions were often ridiculed and considered to be influenced by Western and 'Kaum Muda' propaganda. They were also accused of being a movement that harms women, but the 'new women' continued to write to persuade the society and offer social criticism in local magazines. The 'new women' also rejected the notion that forbade Malay girls to go to Malay or English schools because it was considered a crime and that foreign cultures would influence and destroy society (Muhammad Rahimi, 2017).

The fact is that education is important to prevent Malay women from being caught up in social problems such as prostitution. The increase in prostitution is due to poverty, illiteracy, and a lack of religious education. Therefore, teaching religion in schools or *madrasahs* is also important to avoid social issues. Adequate religious education for women is important because female students who have completed their schooling can be appointed as teachers in their village or appointed as supervisors to help other women who are involved in unhealthy activities. Issues of prostitution of

Malay women were touched on by some articles in *Pengasuh* (1931) and *Saudara* (1938), with most advising and encouraging girls go to school so that they would not be affected by bad culture. Education could also prevent parents from marrying their daughter at a young age. In fact, education is expected to reduce divorce rates that cause women to live in poverty such that they are forced to engage in prostitution.

Apart from the school provided by the government, Malay parents could also send their daughters to religious schools such as Madrasah al-Hādī Diniyyah in Penang. The school also used the services of female teachers and applied the curriculum of Sekolah Diniyyah Puteri, in Padang Panjang, Indonesia. The women's teachers at Madrasah al-Hādī Diniyah played an important role in educating the women and underwent regular training for their teaching syllabus. Throughout school, female students would be exposed to knowledge, and were trained to be confident in arguing and speaking for the truth. In such a way, female students realised that knowledge is the 'key' of life.

The school curriculum emphasised religious education, healthcare, class debates, lectures, and sewing and cooking classes. Besides that, Malay parents started to send their daughters to study abroad to schools like Diniyyah Puteri Indonesia, Sumatra. Sakinah Junid, Shamsiah Fakeh, and Aishah Ghani were among the female students that studied there. In so doing, they received exposure about the politics and cruelty of the Colonialists (Mahani Musa, 2010).

For example, in Kedah, Thomas Sowell reported a total of 589 applications to enrol girls in 42 schools in Kedah. The British officer also received a petition from parents to allow their daughters to attend boys' schools. Parents in Kedah also agreed to provide land for the construction of schools and were willing to work together to

build schools for their children (Mahani Musa, 2010). Malay and English girls' school in Kedah also introduced carpentry to their students. In addition to learning English, the school also taught domestic science, healthcare, and sewing classes. Nevertheless, these female teachers also faced difficulties because they were bound by their role to their family, especially juggling between the demands of the job and as a mother and wife. Most of them could not relinquish their duties as mothers just to get years of college training outside of their area. Hence, the gap between teaching experience between male and female teachers became enormous at the time. However, appropriate teacher training for potential women teachers were established to help educate and teach students in Malay schools.

The educational needs among the Malay women increased in line with the interest to study among them. Soon, they became willing to get education without any help from the government. Besides, the government also did not need to enforce the law that required Malay girls to go to school just like Malay boys. The Malay women teachers at the time faced problems of not receiving special training like the male teachers. They had to strive and set a suitable curriculum for women and girls, namely domestic science lessons. Nevertheless, the Melaka Women's Teacher Training College officially opened in 1935 to finally train women teachers in Malaya. In 1938, female trainees aged between 6 and 15 years old underwent training at the college. To continue this training, several senior students were appointed as instructors to continue the tradition that had been formed. Trainees at the college were also active in sports activities, debates, and cultural performances. The early stages of the curriculum introduced focused on the teaching of domestic science and social life (Muhammad Ridzuan & Arba'iyah, 2014).

In addition, the Malay women also cited the figure of Ibu Adjeng Kartini, also known as a prominent Indonesian activist, who advocated for women's rights and female education and cite her as a symbol of women's emancipation and education in Malaya (Ruhana Padzil, 2017). In the past, the status of the wife was usually considered trivial. The wife was powerless or incapable because she was confined to the domestic arena. These women demanded that all women have ambitions and knowledge, so that they could be good wives and also pass on a perfect education to their children. Through education, women could avoid negative practices in their lives. In addition, in the interests of the people, the Malays needed wise mothers because the mothers will go on to produce clever children who will grow up to contribute to the country.

The formation of schools for girls at villages introduced by 'Kaum Ibu Indonesia' inspired women activists in Malaya. Women were encouraged to have a confident attitude and to dare to voice their ideas and thoughts like Raden Adjeng Kartini. Malay women were urged to be brave and hoped that someday a 'Kartini Peninsula' would also rise from among the Malay women who would lead the nation, triggering awareness to work towards the nation's progress. Hence, most of the villages in the State of Johor established Malay schools although there were no trained teachers to teach in those schools.

After World War II ended, women's education improved with many schools being built to cater to women. Parents who had a strong awareness and good economic position gave their girls the opportunity to further their education to a higher level and some even sent their daughters abroad. In addition to being involved in education, women were also involved in other welfare activities, not only at home. Women began to be actively involved in the field of welfare and began to share their knowledge to

train women to be responsible to society. The women began to hold cooking classes, sewing classes, and embroidery and housekeeping classes. After the Second World War, women's education was still given priority but the education system remained closely related to the role of women as wives and mothers in society.

2.3.2 Establishment of Malay Women's Movement

The Malay women's movement began to sprout up all across Malaya through the 'Kaum Ibu' movement or the Malay women teachers' movement. These movements began a campaign for women to 'free themselves' from the thoughts and customs of tradition that constrained personal development. Most of the female teachers came out voluntarily to provide information to Malay parents and the communities in villages to educate their daughters. The movement emphasised education based on religious values, humanity, justice, and truth. Although there were obstacles, especially from conservative religious leaders, this movement still carried out its mission to educate future generations. In fighting for social emancipation, the female teachers' movement at that time received support from male reformists, male teachers, and local nationalists the likes of Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad al-Hādī, Zaaba and Harun Aminuddin Rashid whose support could be seen through their writings in the magazines *Al-Ikhwān*, *Idaran Zaman*, *Majalah Guru*, and others (Rahimi Hasan, 2013).

Thus, apart from enlightenment activities through lectures and debates on education, Malay women also planned to establish the women's movement itself. Previously, women only led the women's section in large organisations as well as received guidance and assistance from the men's movement. For example, there were several exchanges of ideas between organisations to discuss the development of existing women's movements. The Association of Teachers of French Women of Kuala

Lumpur, Selangor, Johor Baharu, Penang, and teachers from other regions met to form an association of women who were strong and brave enough to speak and compete with other nations in Malaya.

These women teachers also established women's associations or known as mothers' associations in every state and district. The group started a formal role in modernising the Malay community and women around the 1920s. The position of women, which was lagging from men in all aspects of life, necessitated the establishment of women's associations to inspire the women that it was their duty to educate society. Activists in this society helped women, preserved and contributed to the leadership of the family, to become true educators and mothers that serve the nation and the state (Muhammad Rahimi, 2017).

The establishment of Malay Women's Federation Johor is the first symbol of Malay women activism. This movement was officially established in April 1930 in Batu Pahat by Ibu Zain. In the first Johor Mothers' Conference in 1931, members of this association were encouraged to give ideas and ask questions regarding women's lives through writings in women's magazines that were then published. The main purpose of the establishment of this women's movement was to (1) Publish the first women's magazine; (2) Establish an association or movement as a platform to unite mothers of children with teachers to work together and help each other; (3) Hold a speech and debate club to make women braver to speak and learn; (4) Strengthen the relationship with other women's associations in the Malay region such as Sumatra, Java, Pattani, and Brunei; and (5) Provide constructive suggestions to develop women's economy.

The movement also actively held meetings with the villagers and discussed with the aristocracy to help women who have been marginalised from education and public

life. To strengthen the movement, they started organising meetings, conferences, speeches and started to visit other states to learn and establish relationships with other women's movements. In fact, this movement has never had relations with women associations in other States in Malaya to strengthen their sisterhood and exchange ideas and news about the activities of women in other states. Kalsom Awang and Asfiah Sulaiman were among the activists from the Women's Federation of Malay Johor, who wrote about their visits and discussions with the mother's association and the Federation of Malay Women Teachers in Penang. The association also used the same philosophy of struggle, 'Agama Dididik Moden Dibela' to raise awareness of women in education (Mahani Musa, 2010). This association supported women to become permanent members of society while reminding them of the ethics and social boundaries that needed to be adhered to.

In addition to the Johor Malay Women's Federation, the Federation of Malay Women Teachers Penang was also among the active women's movement to educate society in Malaya (Rahimi & Hamid, 2017). They held various activities including holding meetings for members and exchanging opinions with each other. This development increased the maturity of mothers at the time, as they also discussed the issue of their children's education, homeland issues, and homeland politics. The Madrasah al-Hādī Diniyah Mothers Association also held a special gathering for mothers every year to meet and give awareness talks on religion and politics, and instil the spirit of independence. The women of the Malay Peninsula were urged to take a bold step in their life and be positive.

The association also explained the awareness of Malay men in supporting the association of mothers to encourage them to discuss the progress of the nation.

However, women were emphasised not to be negligent with new education so as to abandon polite manners and responsibilities as a housewife (Penang Mothers General Assembly, *Madrasah al-Hādī*: 20-23). 'Kaum Ibu' and the Federation of Malay Women Teachers also collaborated with other movements. This relationship aimed at exchanging ideas and struggled to put the Malay youth to be on par with youths in other countries. This awareness campaign was extended through writing. Female teachers were aware that the Malays needed to raise the standard of education and develop the nation in line with other European nations. However, most of this writing was seen as not challenging the social and cultural situation but emphasising the importance of education for women for the progress of the nation and homeland.

Apart from that, the women's movement known as 'Sahabat Pena Association', established in Penang, is another one of the active movements at the time. This association encouraged girls among teenagers who were usually hidden from the public, to be brave and to express their voices. This association was willing to improve the style of traditional women's life. They also strived to establish sisterhood with 'Sahabat Pena' from other states. This association became famous and was well received by young people throughout the States of Malaya, Sarawak, and Labuan until May 1935. When 'Sahabat Pena' reached more than a thousand members, it raised suspicions that it was a youth movement that called for bad and had a subversive political purpose. The association also published its own magazines, namely *Suara Pena* and *Sahabat Pena* magazines, which were regarded as the voice of the movement. However, the movement met with resistance from conservative Malays because it was considered to poison the minds of young girls. It was thought that the movement taught writing and reading love letters only. In May 1934, the author of '*Saudara*' magazine reminded its members not

to write letters to the women in 'Sahabat Pena' to avoid oblique views from the community.

Furthermore, the 'Kaum Muda' movement in Kelantan, known as Setiawan Belia, was established in 1931 to attract youths in Kelantan to join the organisation and become active in the movement. The club aimed to unite male teenagers, and even encouraged the participation of women youth in their activities. The main purpose of its establishment was to encourage youths to be involved in writing and to spark their interest in political activities. Apart from debate activities and critical writing, this movement often invited famous figures to give talks such as Ibrahim Yaacob, Hj. Abbas Taha, Rahim Kajai, and several leaders from Indonesia. In 1934, the office of Setiawan Belia was raided by the police and Sofiah Khuzaimah was detained. She had obtained some documents and was forced to hand them over to the police. The youth movement was raided on suspicion of having ties to the Indonesian Communist Party (Aisyah, 2012).

The contribution of these women's movements is important because these activists' attracted women and trained them to be braver and that they could also be the changers of societies. The establishment of the women's movements was an effort to free women from backwardness and ignorance and it was an initial step to improve the position and social status of women in societies. Moreover, the movement succeeded in bringing reforms in societies and increased the morale of women and mobilise them in the struggle toward nationalism. With the movement, women activists dared to speak and write their ideas through newspapers or magazines to inspire the progress of women, race, and country.

2.4 The Role of Malay Scholars in Advocating Women's Rights in the 20th Century

In the early of 20th century, the number of religious scholars increased in Malaya. Ismail Che Daud (2021) found that Kedah was among the several states that had educated 60 scholars the like of Wan Muhammad Idris bin Jamal, known as Syeikh Jarum (1849-1911), Wan Sulaiman bin Wan Siddiq (1874-1935), Hussain bin Muhammad Nasir, also known as Tuan Hussainin Kedah (1863-1936), Tuan Guru Syeikh Idris bin Syeikh Abdul Rahman (1910-1987), Haji Omar Zuhdi (1919-1994), Haji Yahya Kupang (1906-1959), and others.

Similarly, Kelantan had many male scholars including Wan Muhammad Idris bin Haji Wan Jamal (1849-1911), Wan Muhammad bin Wan Ismail (1844-1915), Haji Yaakob bin Haji Ahmad (1895-1956), Haji Abdul Kadir Melor (1903-1958), Haji Abdullah Tahir Bunut Payong (1897-1961), Haji Nik Mat 'Alim Pulau Melaka (1905-1977), and others. Terengganu was also known for scholars such as Sayyid Abdul Rahman Muhammad al-Idrus who went by the popular name Tukku Paloh (1817-1917) and Haji Omar Ahmad (1878-1961) (Saadan et al., 2018), and many others.

These Malay scholars have huge contributions and significant role in spreading religion to the community. They delivered their religious knowledge orally in the mosque and schools, and interestingly, they also visit resident's home to do so. The role of scholars was to change the life of the community for the better and to facilitate the community in understanding, learning, and deepening the knowledge of Islam. Their audiences covered both male and females. These scholars never disallowed women to come and learn, but if there were difficulties among the audiences to participate in the

lecture, another medium used to disseminate the knowledge among the Malay scholars was through their writings and publications.

The existence of the religious writings can influence society by affecting not only how Islam is perceived but also how the way individuals think. Additionally, the writings of these scholars can also be disseminated more widely compared to verbal communication. As a result, it greatly benefits the Malay society, particularly the women who received informal education at home. They can read and learn while performing their domestic responsibilities.

Interestingly, these scholars' writings can be found in a variety of disciplinary fields. It significantly helps women in comprehending religious studies along with the life's studies. For example, the books of interpretation (*tafsir*) such as *Kitab al-Khazin* written by Syeikh Muhammad Yusoff bin Awang, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Hakam* written by Syeikh Mustafa Abdul Rahman (Ismail, 2019) and many others. These writings assisting women in understanding and expanding their knowledge of the Qur'an, as well as enabling them to practice its teachings in real life.

More intriguingly, there are also religious writings that specifically addressed on women's issues, such as books that discuss a woman's behaviour based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. For example, the book *Kitab Adab Perempuan* by Ahmad bin Ya'qub, this book gives specific instructions on how to behave as a child, woman, and mother in order for herself to be an obedient servant of God. In addition, there are also writings that advocate for women's rights, including the right to formal education, participation in social and economic activities, and others.

Furthermore, Malay scholars also contributed to the establishment of educational institutions. There have been numerous effective efforts to start schools just

for women. For example, Syed Syeikh al-Hadi, who founded the girls-only Madrasah al-Hadi Diniyyah in Melaka in 1915 (Mohd Azrani et al., 2015). This madrasah provides female students opportunities and exposes them to a variety of curricular subjects; in reality, they are taught to confidently defend their positions and develop social skills in order to deal with the challenges of the modern world. The school's curriculum builds the greatest emphasis on lessons in religion, healthcare, debate, lectures, sewing, and cooking.

Besides, Sheikh Junid Toha has also founded Madrasah Diniyyah Islamiyyah Puteri, Kampung Lalang, a special madrasah for female students in 1935. There were nearly 90 female students enrolled to study at the institution's beginning. Sheikh Junid appointed four female teachers, including his daughter Sakinah, to teach at the madrasah in order to handle the increasing number of female students (Rahimi, 2017).

Moreover, Muhammad Fadlullah bin Muhammad Suhaimi was one of the scholars who fought in 1941 to establish a Madrasah Na'im li al-Banat built in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, solely for female students. In the beginning, there were only seven female students and one teacher, Hussain bin Muhammad in the school. However, the number of students had grown to 653 in 1966, and a new, larger building had been constructed in Kampung Langgar, Kota Bharu, Kelantan (Abu Hanifah, 2019).

In conclusion, the Malay scholars applied various approaches to advocate and promote justice for women's rights, in order to raise awareness on the importance of women's roles in every aspect of human life. Their role has given impacted to the social development of Malay women as well as their involvement in the educational, political, and economic sectors.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed Malay women's historical position in the 20th century. It also identified the status of Malay women before and after Malaysia's independence based on different points of view. Malay women's activism and their struggles for emancipation were also explored. At the end of the chapter, the emergence of Malay scholars in Malaya and their role in advocating women's rights in the 20th century was briefly discussed. The next, Chapter Three emphasised on Malay male scholars' writings concerning women in the 20th century.

