

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY  
AND COUNSELLING  
(IJEPC)**[www.ijepe.com](http://www.ijepe.com)**ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND THE EVOLVEMENT OF MUSLIM  
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**Article Info:****Article history:**

Received date: 30.01.2025

Revised date: 13.02.2025

Accepted date: 09.03.2025

Published date: 17.03.2025

**To cite this document:**

Abd Wahab, R., Ahmad, S., & Cusairi, R. M. (2025). Islamic education and the evolvement of muslim women identity in Malaysia *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 10 (57), 687-699.

**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.1057044**This work is licensed under** [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Islamic education is important in instilling religious identity for every Muslim. In this case, Islamic schools play the role of moulding and strengthening Muslim women's identity which has been wrongly interpreted as being marginalized, passive, weak, and uneducated by the western society. The goal of educational institutions is to form faith, good practice, and values among Muslim women. Therefore, this research is aimed to illustrate the role of Islamic schools and education in forming the Muslim women's identity among Malaysians. The data was collected from documentation and media resources such as books, journals, unpublished thesis and dissertations, conference and seminar papers, magazines, blogs and websites. The findings of this research showed that Islamic education has given a significant impact to the formation of Muslim identity as well as changed the perception of Muslim parents and society towards the importance of seeking knowledge. In addition, this research found that the formation of Muslim women's identity is a continuous process which is closely related to Islamic schools, culture, and the social environments of a society. To sum up, all the issues involving Muslim women identity require the Muslim institutions and community to show commitment to their values, and support is required from the state to ensure that the Muslim women identity are suitable to the contemporary modern society.

**Keywords:**

Islamic Education, Muslim Women Identity, Evolvement

## Introduction

The current provision of Islamic education for Muslim women is very different now from that of Malay ancestors received. As changes have occurred in society, for example in terms of education, socialization, role models and access to the new media, this has impacted Muslim girls' and women's Islamic education as well. Rippin (2003: 178) argues that 'modernity is that which has created fundamental changes in behaviour and beliefs about economics, politics, social organization and intellectual discourse'. Such changes have gradually occurred everywhere around the globe, and modernity can be seen as 'a world phenomenon' (Rippin, 2003: 178) although it maps out in different ways in different societies. According to Hefner (2007: 3), the modernizing of Muslim education has resulted in four main outcomes: an increased variety of Muslim educational institutions; transformations in *madrasahs* and Islamic higher education through modern social and intellectual developments; state efforts to reform and modernise Islamic education; and changes undertaken for 'the future of Islamic education in an age of globalisation and pluralisation'.

Therefore, this study tends to examine some key aspects of the evolvement of Muslim women education, including the women's perception, identity and attitude towards Islamic education in the past and present. These aspects are necessary to be examined because they contribute to the outcomes of education endeavour. In addition, many western studies have shown that Muslim women are passive, depressed and the victims of discrimination in pursuing education. Thus, this study will explore the negotiations that take place between the culture, belief, policy and the school settings and values in the formation of Muslim women identities.

## Muslim Women Identity: The Literatures

There is a plethora of literatures, theories, and models available on the identity development of students (Evans, et. al, 2010), but very little of this research and literature focuses on the development of Muslim women identity at Islamic institutions. Sensitivity toward Muslim women identity development is necessary and not currently being given the attention it deserves. This research believes that Muslim girls may face even more challenges than Muslim boys (Jawad & Benn 2003; Smalley, 2006; Din, 2017; Breen, 2018). It is because, sometimes Muslim girls are always bounded by their culture, tradition, and religious tradition and obligations (Haw, 1998; 2011).

Louise (1998) suggests that the young women reproduced and resisted stereotypical discursive of themselves as oppressed and passive victim. However, this study discussed from a critical, feminist conceptualisations of identity which challenge positivistic social psychological theories of ethnic identity.

Nazia Latiff (2002), discussed the women rights and identity in Islam by looking at the areas of family law, political and legal participation. Meanwhile, Azizah Kassim (1969) who studied the Malay women community in Malaysia, she argued that in a traditional Malay society, the status, role and status of women have been set according to the norms and beliefs of the community. Similarly, Ridzuan (2016) indicates that the identity formation among Malay women was bounded by tradition and culture. Both of them agreed that aspects such as position, role and status of Malay women are among the important aspects that need to be examined as it has a close relationship with level of one's Malay woman education.

Nik Safiah Karim (1990), in her book *'Malaysian Women, Hope and Challenges'* has discussed in detail about women in Malaysia, especially in the areas of female education, leadership, family development, political engagement and organization and also the crisis of female identity in the 21st century. She also discussed the involvement of women in education which is said to be very encouraging especially in the late 20th century. However, this research only discussed the development of Malay women's identity in the late of 20th century.

Wazir Jahan Karim (1992) in his book *'Women and Culture, Between Malay Adat and Islam'* has discussed in depth about the impact of Malay's customs and culture on the position, role and rights of Malay women in Malaysia. Moreover, he also discussed the role and position of Malay women in the early days by referring to the classical texts of the Malay literatures. He also discussed about acceptance secular education to the Malay girls who have given many effects on the level of thinking and awareness among Malay women. In addition, he also discussed the impact of education on the awareness of Malay women in politics and the involvement of Malay women in political party after the Second World War. However, the discussions are made quite limited and use a lot of secondary resources. However, his writing is helpful especially in understanding the influences of custom and religion on identity, perceptions, positions and roles of Malay women in Malaysia.

Mahani Musa (2005) in his study entitled *'History and Socio-Economics Malay Women of Kedah 1881-1940'*, has discussed in detail about Kedah women from social and economic aspects. The study focuses on the improvement of socio-economic of Malay women in Kedah and their problems during that time. Her study can help the researchers in understanding the whole range of Malay women education, British policy towards Malay education and the Malay's reaction towards women's education which is much related to the development of Muslim women identity nowadays. However, the study involved the education of Malay women in Kedah only.

Therefore, this study intends to fill what is currently a large gap in the literature related to the development of Muslim women's identities in Malaysia.

### **Women in Early Islam**

The status of woman in Islam is something unique and novel that has no similarity in any other systems (Jawad & Benn 2003). In the Eastern Communist world, the democratic nations or during *Jahiliyyah* period, women were under depression and discrimination, and have not been treated as men's equals (Afkhami & Friedl, 1997; Jawad & Benn, 2003). The role of women in Muslim society has changed significantly in the centuries since Islam came in Arabia in the early 600 A.D. Their position has varied with shifting social, economic, education and political circumstances (Jawad & Benn, 2003). The contents of the *Quran* and the early Muslims history bear witness to the fact that woman is, at least, as vital to life as man himself, and that she is not inferior to him nor is she one of the lower species- the last revelation in respect of women in the *Quran* (33:35) that men and women are equal in the eyes of Allah (Sattar, 2012). In fact, their status was taken for granted to be equal to that of man but suits their nature as Muslim women. The term 'nature' is understandable because man and woman are not identical.

Sheikh Yusof Al- Qaradawi (1997) defined the Muslim women identity as below;

- 1) Islamic. Required to cover the *aurah* and perform religious obligations such as pray, fast, and give charity. As Allah says in the Quran,

"...So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another"

- 2) Educated. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said:  
"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim". [Al-Bayhaqi]
- 3) Active and brave. As Allah says:

" The believers, men and women, are "Awliy," (helpers, supporters, friends, protectors) of one another, they enjoin (on the people) Al-Ma`ruf (i.e. Islamic Monotheism and all that Islam orders one to do);and forbid (people) from Al-Munkar (i.e. polytheism and disbelief of all kinds, and all that Islam has forbidden). [ Surah 9:71]

Sattar (2012) has sum up that the status of woman in Islam is unprecedentedly high and realistically suitable to her nature. She also added that Muslim woman first; is equal to man in pursuit of education and knowledge, second; is entitled to freedom of expression, third; participate in public life, fourth; to contract, to enterprise, to earn and possess independently. It is thus apparent that women are highly regarded and esteemed in an Islamic society, encouraged to participate actively for its betterment. This is referring to a Muslim woman who is Islamic, educated, brave and active like Khadijah R.A and Aisyah R.A.

### **Muslim Women Identity before Independence**

The Muslim women identity in Malaysia is different now from the past. According to Swettenham (1899), Manderson (1978), Aisyah (1992), Mahani (2005, 2010) and Muhammad Ridzuan (2016), Malay women in the past were controlled by the culture, custom and beliefs in the fact that women should stay at home and learn how to be a good wife. Majority of women did not get formal education at school; some of them received education at least at the primary level. Manderson (1978) points his view based on the issue of educational right among genders. He insists that this attitude of Malay women was because of the perception of the Malay parents towards education especially before the World War II. During that time, school became a place of Christian missionary to spread Christianity and free mixing between sexes which contradicted to the local community culture. Meanwhile, during the colonization period, British had set up schools with the only aim to produce a woman with domestic skills (Swettenham, 1899; Mahani, 2005, Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016). Stevenson (1975) argues that British were not interested to upgrade Malay women's education as it did not contribute to the British economy. Awang Had Salleh (1977) claims that the British schooling system did not fulfill the needs of Malay Muslim women. Thus, this situation had become a significant barrier for parents to send their daughters to British school and thus making them bounded with the wrong perceptions.

Based on reports from the British government, the education of the Malay women had grown slowly and was far behind as compared to education for boys (Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016). The British government reported that the problem was due to the attitude of the Malays who were considered 'prejudicial' and 'pessimistic' to women's education (Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016). In addition, majority of the parents, were nervous about allowing their girls to traverse street or path unaccompanied and the mothers disliked losing the help from their daughters in

serving the house chores. Assistance from girls is said to be very much needed by parents, especially to help cook, wash and care for other siblings while parents were doing their daily work (Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016).

Furthermore, the Malays are also said to be bounded by the customary, belief and cultural systems of the Malays. In the same vein, the position, roles and rights of males and females had been set in line with the customary, cultural and normal demands of the society. For example, a married woman is her husband's wife and is solely responsible for managing her husband, child and household. Women are also endowed with physical strength and more emotional. Hence, the role and position of women only hover around the domestic space. The situation is also due to the customary and cultural factors of the Malay community that still adhere to the 'patriarchal system' and have dominated the worldview of the community (Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016). The husband, on the other hand, is primarily the breadwinner of the family. After the inception of Islam in the 13th century, the position of women has still not changed much. However, Islam places a high position for women (Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016).

On the British assumption that Malay customs and culture were considered conservative. In fact, this was the main cause why girls were denied the right of pursuing education. Malays were also worried and suspicious of the secular education system introduced by the British government which was to undermine the customs and cultural institutions of the Malay community (Muhammad Ridzuan, 2016). In traditional Malay societies, the role and status of women have been set according to the norms and beliefs of the community. The aspects such as the position, role and status of Malay women in Malays tradition were among the important aspects that needed to be examined as it had a direct relationship with the form and level of education given to the Malay women.

Wan Abdul Kadir (1993) in a study on Malay culture stated that the girls were educated with cooking skills, taking care of younger siblings and households. Girls who know how to take care of households were highly regarded by the community. Parents were very concerned about the abilities of women in housekeeping. They are also prohibited from going out of the house at will, and are also forbidden to associate with any man who is not blood-related. According to Frank Swettenhem (1929), Malay girls need to equip themselves to be wives one day. She is mostly in the house, helps her mother to carry water from the river, morning and evening, when all Malays bathe, and assists in the cooking, or another household work. Frank Swettenhem's statement is in line with R.O. Winstedt's (1969) writing on traditional education for Malay girls. Winstedt says Malays community believed that girls should stay indoors. Usually they are taught by their own mother about the basic needs of housekeeping such as cooking, making mats, sewing clothes and also helping men to work on paddy fields (Winstedt, 1969). In addition, girls are also taught how to guard their self-esteem and avoid getting caught up in the vicious or conflicting matters of Islam. Therefore, they are prohibited from associating with men who are not their *muhrim* (the nearest family), being out of the house alone without being accompanied and so on. It is not intended to stem or restrict the freedom of the Malay women but to safeguard their security and honor. According to gender researchers and analysts, the root cause of these issues is the inability of the Malaysian society at large to understand and handle "gender problems". Malaysian society continued to perceive the role, responsibilities and relationship between men and women according to the traditional mindset, based on the traditional family model where a male bread-winner heads the family and the wife is a full-time homemaker (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003).



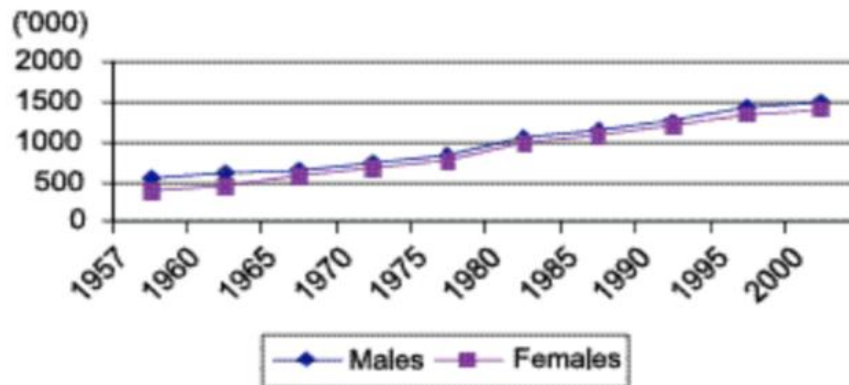
**Muslim Women Identity in Modern Malaysia**

After the independence, with increased access to education, women began to seek knowledge at formal schools. The role and status of women in Malaysia during this time have undergone a profound change in the sense that women started to seek their recognition in education, social, economy and politics (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003). Thus, it led changes in the socio-cultural environment. This emergence has seen a change in women's attitudes and 'taboo' towards their traditional roles.

In modernity, progressive Muslim intellectuals have been extremely supportive of greater equality and education for Muslim women, often appealing to reformed interpretations of the Islamic sources (Benn, 1998; Jawad & Benn, 2003; Azam, 2006; Zaman, 2007). In recent decades, Muslim women have also begun to redefine themselves and their role in society through studying the fundamentals of Islam. As Geaves (1996:60) contends: 'this new awareness has come about not only because of the need for Muslim women to redefine themselves but also because of an increased awareness of religion brought about by the resurgence of Islam worldwide'. The vitality of Muslim girl's and women's education can be seen through i) the establishment of Islamic schools for Muslim girls and ii) the mushrooming of registered Muslim organisations that run study circles for women and mothers, iii) the emergence of Muslim women scholars and preachers and, iv) the mosque activities that are open to both male and female. Today, many mosques and organizations run study circles for women. These circles were described as 'important loci of inter-household women-centred' activity (Werbner 1990: 156). They have provided spaces for women 'to become conversant with Islamic sources and this has enabled them to articulate their Islamic rights' (Afshar, 1998: 119; see Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 220). For some women, study circles provide an important means for resisting exclusion and a way to enter a feminist discourse in which they are free to express their Islamic rights from within their tradition (Afshar, 1998; Samad, 1998; Butler, 2001; Gilliat-Ray, 2010).

Furthermore, many Muslim parents now put fewer restrictions on their girls' higher education studies (Jawad & Benn, 2003), and often actively encourage them in such pursuits. The enrolment of female students at the primary level increased by more than three and a half times during the period of 1957–2000. At the secondary level, the enrolment of female students increased by more than 36 times to reach a total enrolment of 985,692 students in 2000 (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003).

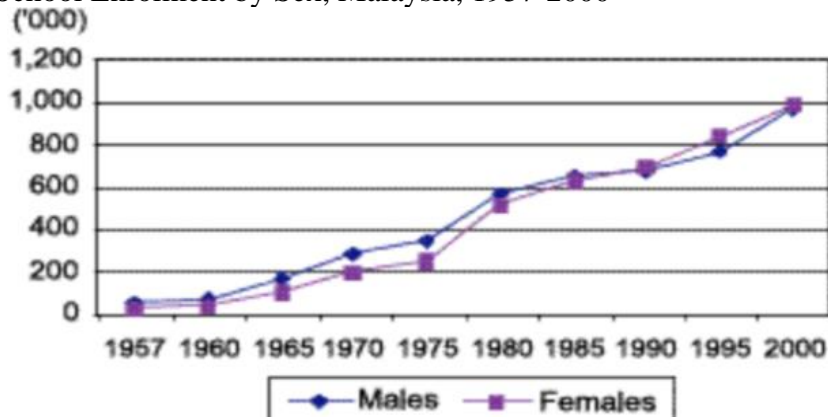
### Primary School Enrolment by Sex, Malaysia, 1957-2000



**Figure1: Chart of Primary School Enrolment by Sex**

Source: (Ministry of Education, 2000)

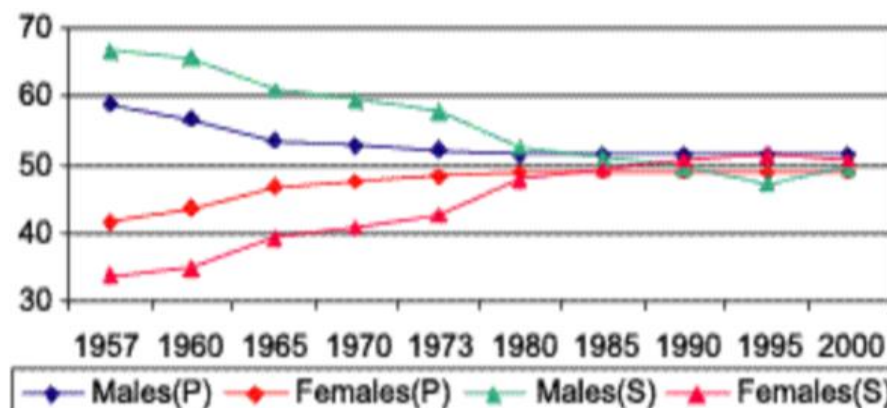
### Secondary School Enrolment by Sex, Malaysia, 1957-2000



**Figure 2: Chart of Secondary School Enrolment by Sex**

Source: (Ministry of Education, 2000)

### Percentage of Males and Females in Primary (P) and Secondary (S) Schools, Malaysia, 1957-2000



**Figure 3: Chart of Percentage of Primary and Secondary Schools Enrolment by Sex**

Source: (Ministry of Education, 2000)

Specific indicators such as the enrolment ratio, the proportion of female to male student enrolment and transition rates reflect the improvement in the educational attainment of women. Women have benefited to a large extent from the expansion of education facilities and the provision of increased educational opportunities. The establishment of all-girls' schools such as Tunku Kurshiah College, Tun Fatimah Girls' School, Bukit Bintang Girls' School and Sri Putri Girls' School paralleled the establishment of the all-boys' schools to provide equal opportunities for girls to advance in education (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003). Data on enrolment at primary and secondary levels indicated that there was a significant increase in the number and proportion of female students at all levels since independence. Figure 1, 2 and 3 show the primary and secondary school enrolment of male and female students during the period of 1957-2000.

Women today are quite aggressive and courageous and have contributed a lot to the development of the country. In fact, Malaysian women have progressed and participated effectively in all aspects of development of the country in many key areas such as education, health, employment, and participation in power-sharing and in the decision-making process. Changes in the legal and institutional framework have also been made to protect, preserve and safeguard their rights and improve their status. As Malaysia evolves from a subsistence agricultural economy to a knowledge-based economy, women will continue to be a primary force influencing the development of future generations of Malaysians. Changes in the sociocultural environment, which have helped to shape the profile of Malaysian women today, will continue to impact women in development (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003).

The family structure has changed over time particularly in the 1990s. The trend shows an increase of nuclear families with dual income; and the Population Census 2000 indicates that 58 per cent of working women are married (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003).

Malaysia government has done many initiatives in enhancing the status and role of women including the following:-

1. National Vision Policy on Women (NPW)- Equitable sharing of resources and access to opportunities for men and women
2. Ministry of Women and Family Development
3. Women Affairs (HAWA) ,
4. The National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID)
5. The National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO).

Furthermore, the enactment of new laws and the continuous review and amendment of existing legislation have been undertaken to preserve, reinforce and protect the rights and legal status of women. Therefore, since independence and over the past four decades, women have significant improvements in their status and in gender equality. Today, Malaysia has a growing number of women that are very active, educated and brave. They are:

1. Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Binti Wan Ismail, the first female Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development.



2. Dato' Seri Dr Siti Hasmah bt. Mohd Ali, wife of the former fourth and Seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia, is a medical doctor. She was the second Malay woman to graduate from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya, Singapore in 1955, and in a way, set the record for women in her time.
3. Tan Sri Nuraizah Abdul Hamid was honoured as a Woman of Distinction in Malaysia for the year 2001. The award conferred on her was a special recognition and appreciation for being one of the most successful and prominent, high-ranking woman administrators in the public service.
4. Dato' Dr. Mashitah Ibrahim, was a former Minister and Senator and also one of the most prominent Muslim women scholars.

The accomplishments of these women will definitely be an inspiration to other women in Malaysia to strive for greater heights.

### **Islamic Education: The Key Factor of Muslim Women's Evolvment?**

Islamic schools play a vital role in developing and promoting Muslim women identity to the students. This is because an Islamic school provides Islamic education and also has an environment in which the students can learn and live Islam, create social and emotional stability and develop a strong sense of belonging to the Muslim *Ummah*. The Islamic school does not only preserve the Islamic heritage and value per se, but contributes towards development and progress of the Muslim *Ummah* in general (Ishak, 1995; Tamuri, 2004; Halstead, 2005; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Sound, 2017; Din, 2017; Breen, 2018).

Generally, the aim of the existence of Islamic school is to provide education as well as to develop and promote a holistic Muslim women in terms of intellect, spirit and emotion. The existence of Islamic schools clearly shows that parents are very concerned about the importance of Islamic education. Islamic schools contribute in moulding a generation of Muslims who are pious and have the ability to preach and practice the Islamic way of life as instructed by Allah. Azra (2008) points out that education aims at holistic human development. Thus, Islamic schools should help people develop spiritually, intellectually, and socially. Al-Syaibani (1979 see in Abas Asyafah, 2014) notes:

...there are three objectives of Islamic education: first, human objectives which are related to self improvement in form of knowledge, behaviour, intelligence and self-actualization. Second, is the social objective related to living together, and third, professional objective which takes education and learning as an important component considering Islamic education as field of knowledge, an art, and as professional as well as a social activity in the community.

With regards to the teaching of Islamic education at Islamic schools, Sharif (1976, p. 45) argues that Islamic education is 'the device for helping an individual to full stature'. His elaboration involves the 'assimilation of Divine attributes' leading to a life of 'unity, power, freedom, truth, beauty, goodness, love, and justice' (ibid). Abdul Halim el-Muhammady (1993) explains that Islamic education gives focus on several concepts namely; life-long learning, to be a responsible human beings and to preach and practice the Islam. In fact, this Islamic education promotes piety, honesty, propriety, trustworthiness, passion and good moral values (Khadijah, 2009). This total commitment to character-building based on the ideals of Islamic ethics is the

highest goal of Islamic education. (Al-Attas, 1979). A more comprehensive definition of Islamic education was composed at the First World Conference on Muslim Education where participants were of the following view:

Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total personality of man through the training of man's spirit, intellect, his rational self, feelings and bodily senses. Education should cater therefore for the growth of man in all its aspects: spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, linguistic, both individually and collectively and motivate all aspects towards goodness and the attainment of perfection. The ultimate aim of Muslim education lies in the realization of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large. (Ashraf, 1985, p. 4)

Ishak (1995) defines Islamic education as basically a process of training the mind, physical, moral, and social sense to be a good man and a good citizen. This differs with that of Hassan Langgulung (1995) who provides analysis of the concept of Islamic education as having two purposes: The first is that education is public in nature, which includes spiritual, physical, emotional, social, political, cultural, economic, and other types of education relating to human life. Public education is to educate people to practice the teachings of Islam in their daily lives which include economic, cultural, social, and other aspects. Second, Islamic education is limited i.e. it provides a commonly called religious knowledge such as; *tawheed*, *fiqh*, *faraid*, sufism and others comprising of knowledge and knowledge on compulsory religious obligations. He also concludes that Islamic education is the process of preparation of young people to fill their role in the transfer of knowledge and Islamic values that are aligned with the function of humans to do good in this world and reap the rewards in the hereafter (Hassan Langgulung, 1995).

The Muslim community has started to become aware that the project of maintaining the Muslim identity will fail if no Islamic education is imparted to the next generation. As a result of such developments, the Muslim community has become more capable of distinguishing between cultural tradition and Islamic culture. In turn, this has led to a growth in the number of Muslim girls' independent schools and the percentage of Muslim girls attending universities and colleges (Raza, 1993; Jawad & Benn, 2003). Butler (2001) argues that a majority of new generation women who are highly educated want to study, pursue careers, and are subsequently seeking ways of putting off getting married until much later in their lives.

The attitudes of Muslim parents are changing as a result of the demands of communities, the state and wider society. For subsequent generations, religion has often been the key factor in determining identity. This is particularly the case for young women. The resurgence that can be seen amongst young Muslims of their religious identity does in many cases correspond to an increased level of knowledge and practice. Dr. Raj argued that the curriculum, environment and ethos of the school enhance the women self-esteem and inspire confidence in them about their culture and future, aiming to advance pupils' personal and social development, which are regarded as the most essential educational goals (Mustafa, 1999).

## Conclusion

The provision of Islamic schools and Islamic education enables Muslim women to engage with and adapt to the contemporary societies that they live in whilst retaining their Muslim identities.

Muslim women are now also responding to the need to work in other contexts to achieve community cooperation and to help educate other women about what it means to be Muslim. To achieve this end, they need support from both the Muslim community and the state – through Muslim organizations and leadership and state-recognition of their Muslim rights as Muslim women citizens.

### Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge and extend special gratitude to all individuals and institutions whose guidance, support, and resources contributed to the completion of this study. The author (s) received no financial support for the research.

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