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Information Seeking Behaviours of Rural Women in Malaysia

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Introduction

In traditional society, women were supposed to do housework, take care of children, and give the family emotional stability. However, with the social and economic changes that affect our urban and rural society, the traditional values also change. More women are engaged in full-time jobs. No longer are they only women and mothers; they are also business women, politicians, and contributors to society. Rural women who in most cases do not have full time jobs, have also exposed themselves on various fields of financial acquisitions including commerce, service and agriculture. These require them to know how to perform these economic activities in order for them to get more return on their effort. They need to know the way to grow vegetables, how to produce a marketable product and how to advertise the services provided. For instance, a group of women have run a traditional cake production in Negeri Sembilan (Ministry of Agriculture & Agro-Based Industry, n.d.). Women staying at home also can run business through application of information technology through marketing and advertisement (Siti Fatimah Abdul Rahman, 2002).

Since 1991, the government of Malaysia has included in its five-year development plans, a dedicated chapter on Women and Development. On the whole, these have primarily regarded women as resources to be mobilised for national good. Women has been participating actively in the nation's development. The ability and capability of women have been harnessed fully without any form of discrimination. For example the figures for students enrolment in university is currently shows female and male students registered at the university at 69 percent and 31 percent respectively.

Despite progress made by women in all key economic sectors in Malaysia, the majority of women remain concentrated in low skilled and low waged jobs and very few in top managerial and decision-making posts. Women living in rural and remote areas in Malaysia has been documented as lagging behind that of their urban-dwelling counterparts in terms of wealth and literacy. Malaysia's poverty has been a predominantly rural phenomenon. In 1970, 49.3 percent of Malaysian households were below the poverty line. The number of poor rural households as a percentage of the total number of households was 44 percent, the remaining 5.3

percent being urban. By 2002, just 2 percent and 11.4 percent respectively of urban and rural households were living in poverty. Besides poverty the rural households are also faced with problems of illiteracy. This situation is compounded with the emergence of World Wide Web and Internet technologies where digital literacy is important in the knowledge society era. A study done by Mohd Noor (2007) found that " There exists a disparity between the digital/information rich and the digital/information poor among various groups in Malaysia. Coincidentally, the pattern is that the former is located in urban areas whilst the latter in rural, as similar scenario as in the case of poverty.

Regardless of location, however, women tend to be the primary seekers of information for their children and other family members, as well as for themselves (Warner and Procaccino, 2004) In rural Malaysia, more often than not, these women will perform the tasks of women for the family. It is pertinent to note here that in the rural setting there is a strong kinship relationships that existed among the villagers, especially among the community of women in the villages. It is believed that women roles have an impact on families and societies. If they perform accordingly their roles and duties, a quality generation will be produced. Of course in order to achieve that, a sufficient amount of information is a necessity. Here, libraries could play an important role of supplying enough information for them.

In addition to taking care of the family, a house wife is also expected to know something on health matters, children education and the family economics. The questions that need to be answered then are the following : What is the information need of women concerning important family requirements? What is their source of information? What is their information seeking behavior? Is there any barrier to information access? What is the best solution for the related problems?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the information needs of women, to determine the information sources used by rural women in a village of the District of Gombak, in the State of Selangor, to determine their information seeking behaviours and to identify any access barriers to those sources of information. There are altogether nine districts in Selangor and the district of Gombak is located close to the state of Pahang which is one of the underdeveloped states on Peninsular Malaysia. The village in Gombak is chosen for this research because the dwellers there are representatives of the rural community in Malaysia.

Although the village is populated by men and women the focus of this study is on the information seeking behaviours of the rural women, particularly the women. Generally speaking there are quite a number of studies that have focused their concentration on rural dwellers. Momodu (2002) observed that the lack of information in the right quantity and format is the cause for 70 percent of rural dwellers in Nigeria living in crushing poverty. Su and Conway (1995) studied on the information seeking behaviours of the immigrant rural dwellers. Other studies have focused on rural women as the areas of research. Mooko (2005) investigated the information needs and information-seeking behavior of rural women residing in three non-urban villages in Botswana. Davies and Bath (2001) studied the use of information on antenatal and post natal care by minority ethnic women. However there has been relatively very little empirical research from a library and information science perspectives on information needs and information seeking behaviours of women in developing countries.

Methodology

A survey research method was adopted in this study. As it is impossible to obtain a sampling frame for this study, convenient sampling was used to select the households of the villagers. Before the study was conducted, a letter was sent to the village headman for permission to proceed with this study. A sample of 80

women were selected and each was given a questionnaire for them to fill in. Respondents in this study are all married women. Only 51 respondents, or 64 percent of the samples returned the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the demographic information with regard to the level of education of the women residing in the village. The data collected revealed that among 51 respondents, most of them completed high school in which 37 respondents (72.3 percent) hold various high school certificates; 2 respondents (3.9 percent) hold Diploma; and 3 respondents (5.9 percent) hold university degrees. Only 7 respondents (13.7 percent) did not complete high school and 2 respondents (3.9 percent) did not answer the question.

Table 1 Educational Level

| Level of education | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | Did not complete high school | 7 | 13.7 | 13.7 | 13.7 |
| | High school certificate | 37 | 72.5 | 72.5 | 86.3 |
| | College diploma | 2 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 90.2 |
| | Degree | 3 | 5.9 | 5.9 | 96.1 |
| | No answer | 2 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 51 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 2 shows the marital status of the women in the village. Most respondents have a marital age between 1 to 20 years (65 percent), while 22 percent of the respondents have a marital age of 20 to 30 years and only 6 percent have marital age above 30 years. 8 percent did not answer the question.

Table 2 Marital Status

| Marital age | | | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | 1-5 years | 10 | 19.6 | 19.6 | 19.6 |
| | 6-10 years | 9 | 17.6 | 17.6 | 37.3 |
| | 11-15 years | 6 | 11.8 | 11.8 | 49.0 |
| | 16-20 years | 8 | 15.7 | 15.7 | 64.7 |
| | 21-25 years | 7 | 13.7 | 13.7 | 78.4 |
| | 26-30 years | 4 | 7.8 | 7.8 | 86.3 |
| | Above 30 years | 3 | 5.9 | 5.9 | 92.2 |
| | No answer | 4 | 7.8 | 7.8 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 51 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 3 shows childbearing status. Most respondents have children (96 percent). The number of children ranges from one to four.

Table 3: Childbearing

| Number of children | | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| | no children | 3 | 5.9 | 5.9 | 5.9 |

| | | | | | |
|-------|----------------------|----|-------|-------|-------|
| Valid | 1-2 children | 17 | 33.3 | 33.3 | 39.2 |
| | 3-4 children | 13 | 25.5 | 25.5 | 64.7 |
| | 5-6 children | 9 | 17.6 | 17.6 | 82.4 |
| | more than 6 children | 7 | 13.7 | 13.7 | 96.1 |
| | no answer | 2 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 51 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4 shows the distribution of availability of job openings for women outside their homes in the village where they reside. Most of them, about 67 percent, do not have any outside job to perform as there are not much economic activity in the village. Only 27 percent of the women are able to secure outside job. The factors of illiteracy and poverty could also dampen the spirit of seeking outside jobs in the village.

Table 4: Outside Job Opportunities

| Do outside job | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | No outside job | 34 | 66.7 | 66.7 | 66.7 |
| | Do outside job | 14 | 27.5 | 27.5 | 94.1 |
| | No answer | 3 | 5.9 | 5.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 51 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 5 shows the common tasks handled by the women. Cooking tops the tasks list followed by childcare and laundry. They are also concerned with their children's education. In rural areas, there is a realization among the village residents that not only is education important in reducing poverty, it is also a key to wealth creation. Therefore, there is a strong urge on the part of the women to see that their children obtain better education so that they become successful in their studies. They hope to beat poverty through success in their children education.

The fifth important tasks is taking care of their parents. Unlike the case of the big towns where there are nursing homes for aged people these type of institutions are non-existent in rural areas especially in villages. The women have to be responsible for caring the aged and sick parents. Going to market appears to be the least important task. This is possibly due to self-sufficiency in their daily food requirements, as most of the rural dwellers are engaged in small scale cultivation of crops and rearing of fowl on their plot of village land which probably can meet their family needs of food supply.

Table 5 Tasks of Respondents

| No | Home task | No | Home task |
|----|----------------------------|----|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Cooking | 9 | Home needs fulfillment |
| 2 | Childcare | 10 | Husband needs fulfillment |
| 3 | Clothes cleaning | 11 | Sewing |
| 4 | Child education | 12 | Caring for grandchildren |
| 5 | Caring for parents | 13 | Family health care |
| 6 | Home organizer | 14 | Family financial controller |
| 7 | Financing in selling cakes | 15 | Go to market |
| 8 | Gardening | | |

Table 6 indicates the type of information needs that the respondents believed to be important in their daily lives. When women were asked to indicate the information needs that are considered important for them to run their daily lives they choose finance or availability of money to be the most important. Besides

finance the respondents believed information on child education, religion, and food are highly important, then come health information. They scored 82%, 80%, 80%, 71% respectively for finance, child education, religion, and food while access to health information needs receive 69 %. Again, child education has been rated highly important by the women. As the women are rural dwellers they are not much interested to know more than the village lot. As such it is to be expected that they could not be bothered by what is happening in the international arena, thus the score received for international issues is just 8 percent.

Table 6 Type of Information needs

| Information needs | Percent |
|----------------------|---------|
| Finance | 82.4 |
| Child education | 80.4 |
| Religion | 80.4 |
| Foods | 70.6 |
| Health | 68.6 |
| Home beautification | 51.0 |
| Hobbies | 47.1 |
| International Issues | 7.8 |

Table 7 shows the perceived value of the sources of information arranged according to the degree of importance which indicates that the mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio are much preferred as compared to internet which is at the bottom of the table. This pattern of media usage by rural community especially the women has been demonstrated in many studies conducted in developed and developing countries. As a matter of fact in developing countries such as Bangladesh and El Salvador, mass media is conventionally used to promote family planning programme. (Hasan and Baten ,2005)

Table 7 Perceived value of sources of information arranged according to degree of importance

| Sources of information | Percent |
|---|---------|
| All items in newspapers and magazine | 82.4 |
| All items in TV and radio | 82.4 |
| Anything can be found in books | 78.4 |
| Anything that can be found in classes, course, briefing etc | 72.5 |
| All items in video and audio recordings | 51.0 |
| Internet | 17.6 |

Table 8 indicates the preferred sources that the women used when they are in need of the type of information required for their daily lives. For information on food the women seek from family and friends and magazine as the main sources. On child education the women seek from family and friend for the needed information. In the case of home beautification most of the information are extracted from magazines. Information on hobbies, however, are chosen from several sources such as magazines, book, family and friends and television/radio. The women depend mostly on magazines for information on health. Being rural dwellers the magazines they refer to would possibly be those popular magazines which have some sections on health information as these types of magazines are widely distributed all across the country. Women also consulted other sources such as family and friends, newspapers and television or radio for health information. It is interesting to note that women depend on information from family and friends when come to financial matters. As religion, in this case Islam, is a very important aspect of the fabric of village life the women have used several sources to enrich themselves on religious information. The main sources for this type of information

are from attending religious classes or courses and from family and friends. Complementing these sources are religious instruction from books and religious programmes offered by the local television channels in the country.

Table 8 Preferred information sources according to information needs

| Information Needs | Magazine | Family or friend | Newspaper | TV/radio | Book | Class or course | Video or cassette recording | Internet |
|-------------------|----------|------------------|-----------|----------|-------|-----------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Food | 68.6% | 74.5% | 49.0% | 64.7% | 39.2% | 9.8% | 2.0% | 7.8% |
| Child edu | 41.2% | 70.6% | 54.9% | 49.0 | 58.8% | 33.3% | 11.8% | 3.9% |
| Home Beaut | 78.4% | 49.0% | 29.4% | 43.1 | 17.6% | 7.8% | 0% | 3.9% |
| Hobbies | 49.0% | 54.9% | 29.4% | 41.2% | 43.1% | 25.5% | 0% | 2.0% |
| Health | 66.7% | 58.8% | 58.8% | 56.9% | 37.3% | 5.9% | 3.9% | 9.8% |
| Finance | 39.2% | 54.9% | 41.2% | 41.2% | 31.4% | 5.9% | 0% | 3.9% |
| Religion | 41.2% | 74.5% | 51.0% | 64.7% | 60.8% | 70.6% | 37.3% | 3.9% |
| International | 3.9% | 5.9% | 5.9% | 5.9% | 2.0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

Table 9 shows the type of information needs that the women gathered through searching the Internet. Although Internet is the least used sources of information as depicted in Table 7, there are still some women that have resorted to accessing the Internet to obtain their information needs. When the women were asked on the type of information needed by them on the Internet they responded by scoring information on food and child education on top of their lists at 71 percent.

This is followed by health and financial information at 64.3 percent. The results seem to suggest that women would try to gather as much information as possible on food and child education even using the electronic media to obtain this type of information needs.

Table 9 : Type of information needs access through Internet

| Information needs | Percent |
|---|---------|
| Food | 71.4 |
| Child education | 71.4 |
| Health | 64.3 |
| Financial | 64.3 |
| Religion | 57.1 |
| Home beautification | 50 |
| Hobbies | 42.9 |
| Others: international issues, motivation, family problems | 7.1 |

Table 10 shows the type of information sources available on the Internet for the women to choose upon. As expected the women choose the homepages or websites of the relevant resources to fulfill their information needs. However, we did not expect the rural women to use the discussion forums on the Internet as reflected in the results shown in Table 10 . Besides the homepages the women also accessed the online periodicals or magazines to cater for their information needs. The women practically do not use the email to communicate their needs for the relevant information. However, they are very much enthused with information delivered through online advertisements and e-books.

Table 10 Types of information sources on the Internet

| Information needs | Webpage | Email | Advertisement | E-books | Online periodicals | Discussion forums | Others |
|-------------------|---------|-------|---------------|---------|--------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Food | 64.5 | 21.4 | 14.3 | 14.3 | 28.6 | 7.1 | 0 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|---|
| Child education | 57.1 | 7.1 | 14.3 | 21.4 | 35.7 | 21.4 | 0 |
| Home beautification | 28.6 | 0 | 28.6 | 0 | 42.9 | 7.1 | 0 |
| Hobbies | 42.9 | 7.1 | 14.3 | 0 | 28.6 | 7.1 | 0 |
| Health | 57.1 | 14.3 | 7.1 | 21.4 | 28.6 | 21.4 | 0 |
| Financial | 42.9 | 28.6 | 14.3 | 7.1 | 14.3 | 7.1 | 0 |
| Religion | 64.3 | 14.3 | 7.1 | 14.3 | 28.6 | 21.4 | 0 |
| Others: international issues, motivation, family problems | 14.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14.3 | 0 | 0 |

Table 11 shows the barriers that women have to go through while seeking for information generally. Most of the respondents answered positively when asked whether they faced any difficulty in seeking the information needs. However, they are unsure in their responses to issues related to financial matters. Perhaps this uncertainty could be due to lack of skills among the women in accessing Internet sources on finance as well as the pervading poverty among the women in the village that might curtail their information needs on finance. The women also indicate that they do not face any difficulty at all when seeking for information on food.

Table 11: Level of difficulty when seeking the information needs

| Information needs | Very difficult | Difficult | Unsure | Easy | Very easy | No answer |
|---|----------------|-----------|--------|------|-----------|-----------|
| Food | 2.0 | 0 | 7.8 | 31.4 | 45.1 | 13.7 |
| Child education | 2.0 | 9.8 | 17.6 | 43.1 | 11.8 | 15.7 |
| Home beautification | 0 | 5.9 | 23.5 | 43.1 | 7.8 | 19.6 |
| Hobbies | 3.9 | 3.9 | 25.5 | 31.4 | 17.6 | 17.6 |
| Health | 2.0 | 7.8 | 21.6 | 43.1 | 11.8 | 13.7 |
| Financial | 3.9 | 3.9 | 43.1 | 31.4 | 3.9 | 13.7 |
| Religion | 0 | 3.9 | 2.0 | 47.1 | 5.9 | 15.7 |
| Others: international issues, motivation, family problems | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Some of them have offered suggestions to overcome the situation. Some of them suggested that handouts and articles on benefits of Internet, information awareness, health, nutrition etc. should be circulated from time to time. More information related activities also should be organized by the authority. For example, having classes on health, internet, nutrition etc on a regular basis should be initiated. A community special fund for IT literacy program also is recommended to be introduced for all the women. This fund will enable IT literacy program be participated by poor women.

A library, preferably a mosque library has been suggested to be built in the village to fulfill the information needs of women specifically and the rural community generally. The library should incorporate Internet services as a gateway to world wide information for women and other segment of the communities. The library also can organize useful program such as "go to library" campaign etc.

Mobile library services introduced by the State Library of Selangor should reach all groups of users in this village, such as women and the disabled groups who most of their time reside in their houses.

Conclusion

This study reveals the information needs and seeking behaviours of the women in a rural setting of Malaysia. Women are found to be concerned with information needs related to food and child education. When seeking information on food and child education the women use family and/or friends and popular magazines as the main sources. When seeking information on food and child education through the Internet most of the women use the relevant websites or homepages to get the needed information. In addition they also use the online periodicals or magazines. Generally they observed that their village lack certain infrastructure that impedes their success to access the information which they need. They hope that the authorities would assist them in overcoming their problems. They suggest the establishment of a mosque library that have Internet facilities in their village as a short term solution to their problems. In the long term a static public library service should be established in their village by the Selangor Public Library Services in order to cater to the multitude of interests of the rural communities.

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CONTENTS

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