



Attitudes among Students towards Gender Beliefs and Moral Values at Higher Learning Institutions in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study attempts to measure the student's gender role attitudes towards equality on ability, beliefs and moral values aspects in a total of 300 students from two higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Self-administered semi-structured questionnaires were handed to each respondent and the information was collected directly by the researchers. The survey questions included student's gender attitudes towards equality on the aspects of belief, ability and moral values. Results revealed that on belief aspect the most favourable attitude towards equality was in terms of "Boys and girls can perform all tasks equally well" (63.6 percent agree, $M = 3.64$; $SD = 1.00$). Similarly, on ability aspects, more favourable attitude was in terms of "Boys and girls should have equal opportunity and should not be treated differently" (77.03% agree $M = 3.98$; $SD = 0.97$). The results on student's gender attitudes towards equality on moral aspects showed that more favourable attitude was in terms of "Boys and girls should have equal opportunity, according to their needs" (88.3% agree, $M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.80$). Moreover, the results revealed that beliefs were correlated with the demographic variables such as age ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.01$), race ($r = 0.17$; $p < 0.05$) and education ($r = 0.21$; $p < 0.05$) while abilities were co-related to gender ($r = 0.19$; $p < 0.01$) and education ($r = 0.01$; $p < 0.05$). Moral values were also correlated with gender ($r = 0.24$; $p < 0.01$), race ($r = 0.28$; $p < 0.01$) and hometown ($r = 0.174$; $p < 0.01$). With respect to gender beliefs and value aspects, although an overwhelming acceptance was observed among student's attitudes, traditional norms were noted especially on ability aspects. Given the importance of the student's favourable attitude towards equality that would assist to achieve equality between men and women in the community, several suggestions are made.

Keywords

Gender, Attitudes, Equality, Beliefs, Ability, Moral Values, Higher Learning Institutions, Traditional Ideology, Nontraditional Ideology, Cultural Norms

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Subject Areas: Education, Sociology

1. Introduction

Measuring gender role knowledge and attitudes among students have attracted the attention of the scholars. Research on student's gender attitudes has given priority on promoting gender equality in various countries [1] [2]. Currently, due to gender-based inequality, gender-related violence including sexual, physical, or psychological harm to girls and boys on the basis of their sex is common in the classroom as well as public domain. Therefore, it is important to measure the student's gender role attitudes towards equality on the particular aspect of equal ability beliefs and moral values. Gender role attitudes refer to someone's attitudes that reflect beliefs about the roles of men and women. It is about an individual's set of beliefs regarding the appropriate role for men and women in society [3]. It can be further defined as individuals' roles which influence how men and women interact and the attitudes and behaviors expected of each [4].

As mentioned elsewhere, the study attempts to measure student's attitudes of equal beliefs, ability and moral values aspects from traditional and nontraditional perspectives. In general, gender ideology is developed in multiple ways [5]. Gender role attitudes of people are influenced by many aspects of social and cultural stereotypes. It is commonly believed that gender roles can be learned in order to perform the appropriate role towards family, society and community or other social group. Generally, gender ideology appears to be constrained by patriarchal ideology that gives priority to the masculine over the feminine in almost all environments, including school, household, labour market and community [6]. The concept can reflect these attitudes generally or in a specific domain, such as an economic, familial, and social domain. Most gender ideological constructs from traditional (conservative), or anti-feminist to non-traditional (egalitarian), liberal, or feminist. Traditional gender ideologies emphasize the value of the distinctive roles for women and men.

According to a traditional gender ideology, men are considered as bread winner, whereas women fulfill their roles through nurturing and homemaking activities. In addition, according to the traditional point of view, men are more assertive, competitive, decisive, confident, ambitious, and instrumentally oriented, whereas women are more nurturing, empathetic, helpful, sympathetic, gentle, affectionate, and expressively oriented [7] [8]. Traditional gender roles emphasize separate spheres of influence for women and men, with women inside the home and men outside the home. These attitudes bring the inequality that is a major contemporary social problem. The study attempts to examine student's attitudes towards gender equality, investigating whether they perform non-traditional attitudes towards gender equality, especially at the higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

In this study, the intention is to explore the student's attitudes towards gender norms at higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Students are resources of the any nation who play an important role in the development in nation building. Understanding the student's attitudes, practices and norms are imperative in the promotion of gender equality at higher learning institutions. In Malaysia, efforts towards increasing gender awareness among the Malaysian public have started since the new millennium, although gender is a significant factor that limits gender equality in this country. A recent study was conducted by Noorazida *et al.* [9] about gender role conflict among Malay adolescent boys in Malaysia. By adding to the growing literature of gender role attitudes, the author stated that the Malay adolescent boys tended to have high gender role conflict (GRC) possibly worsened that contribute to the high prevalence of psychological distress.

In line with these backgrounds, the study attempts to investigate what practices are acquainted among students at higher learning institutions with respect to equal ability between men and women, gender beliefs and moral values. It is also important to attempt to examine on how socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents would impact on their gender role attitudes towards equality as literature showed that the gender concept is different in different social classes, different ethnic groups, different genders, different life stages and different historical periods [10] [11]. Ruzy *et al.* [12] argued that in the Malaysian context, a person's gender is associated with biology, but the construction of gender identity is also influenced by the family's practices, religious beliefs, ethnicity and societal norms. It is necessary to conduct action research on the student's gender norms attitudes at higher learning institutions from the Malaysian perspective.

2. Objectives and Research Methodology

The objectives of this study are 1) to examine student's gender attitudes towards equality at higher learning in-

stitutions on the aspects of belief, ability and moral values; 2) to determine the relationship between socioeconomic variables and students' gender roles towards the equality on belief, ability and moral values. In this study, the intention is to explore the student's attitudes towards gender norms at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Sultan Idris Education University by using a survey research method. Self-administered semi-structured questionnaires were handed to each respondent and the information was collected directly by the researchers. The survey included student's gender attitudes towards equality on the aspects of belief, ability and moral values. Socioeconomic variables included questions related to the background of the respondents such as age, gender, race, and education level, hometown of the respondents, parent's education and family member's education. Student's attitudes towards equality on belief aspects are related to beliefs about the suitability of males and females for various roles. In order to measure student's attitudes towards gender norms, the study adopted the scales from other sources. The beliefs and moral values questionnaires were closer to tests of stereotypes of women by Belk & Snell [13]. However, some scales were also adopted from the study conducted by Prarthana & Jonathan [14]. Based on the country context some questions have been modified to fulfill the entire objectives. Moreover, respondent's ideology was measured as a continuum ranging from traditional and nontraditional attitudes. In this perspective, respondent's attitude was remarked as the "traditional ideology" and as the "nontraditional ideology". For measuring traditional and nontraditional ideology, the following sequence has been followed for each objective:

- Students' attitudes towards equality on belief aspect (1: Totally Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Undecided; 4: Agree; 5: Totally Agree) 1 & 2 classified as the Nontraditional ideology.
- Students' attitudes towards equality on ability aspect (1: Totally Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Undecided; 4: Agree; 5: Totally Agree) 4 & 5 classified as the Nontraditional ideology.
- Students' attitudes towards equality about moral values (1: Totally Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Undecided; 4: Agree; 5: Totally Agree) 4 & 5 classified as the Nontraditional ideology.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Attitudes towards Gender Belief

With regard to measure students' attitudes towards equality on belief aspects, a total of seven statements were employed in this study. **Table 1** summarized student's attitudes towards equality on belief aspects. Student's attitudes towards equality on belief aspects are related to beliefs about differences in the suitability of males and females for various roles. The results (**Table 1**) revealed that most of respondents tended to have traditional ideology about the equality of males and females for various abilities and roles.

With respects to the stereotype of boys are better at math than girls, the majority of respondents (52 percent) agreed followed by a few (31.0 percent) respondents disagreed respectively. Similarly, a large number of respondents (71.6 percent) agreed that girls are naturally better at literature and home science. On the other hand, only a few (13.6 percent) respondent disagreed and 14.7 undecided respectively. For the statement "boys are naturally better at learning to use computers", the majority (76.0 percent) of respondents agreed followed by a small number of respondents (13.7 percent) disagreed and only a few numbers of respondents (10.3 percent) undecided respectively. Overall, the results revealed that students showed negative attitudes towards women ability in learning math and computer. Similarly, most of the respondents (79.4 percent) agreed that boys need sports activities for their psychological development more than the girls which are threatened by negative stereotypes of equality. The results presented in **Table 1** showed the most favourable attitude towards equality is "Boys and girls can perform all tasks equally well" (63.6 percent agree). However, the moderate favorable attitude was found "A girl should not expect to go to exactly the same places as a boy goes" (20 percent respondents agree and 60 percent disagree respectively).

Correlations: Socioeconomic Variable and Attitudes towards Gender Belief

The study examines the relationship between socioeconomic variables and students' attitudes towards equality on belief aspects. The results are presented in **Table 2** revealed that gender ($r = 0.04$), hometown ($r = 0.04$), fathers' educational level ($r = 0.04$), mothers' educational level ($r = 0.08$) and family members studying or studied at university ($r = 0.02$) had no significant relationship with belief about the equality of males and females on various aspects. Meanwhile, age ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.01$), race ($r = 0.17$; $p < 0.05$) and education ($r = 0.21$; $p < 0.05$) had significantly and positively related to student's attitudes towards belief aspect.

Table 1. Students' attitudes towards equality on belief aspect.

ITEM		TD	3	4	5	TA	T	M	SD
Boys are naturally better at math and science than girls	F	93	51	115	41	156	300	3.28	1.17
	%	31.0	17.0	38.3	13.7	52.0	100		
Girls are naturally better at literature and home science	F	41	44	157	58	215	300	3.73	1.02
	%	13.6	14.7	52.3	19.3	71.6	100		
Boys are naturally better at sports	F	24	12	125	139	264	300	4.24	0.94
	%	8.0	4.0	11.7	43.7	88.0	100		
Boys need sports activities for their psychological development more than girls	F	27	35	131	107	238	300	4.04	0.98
	%	9.0	11.7	43.7	35.7	79.4	100		
Boys are naturally better at learning to use computers	F	41	31	140	88	228	300	3.90	1.02
	%	13.7	10.3	46.7	29.3	76.0	100		
Boys and girls are naturally interested in different topics for conversation	F	21	36	151	92	243	300	4.03	0.89
	%	7.0	12.0	50.3	30.7	81.0	100		
A girl should not expect to go to exactly the same places as a boy goes	F	62	58	131	49	180	300	3.51	1.08
	%	20.6	19.3	43.7	16.3	60.0	100		
Boys and girls can perform all tasks equally well	F	50	59	136	55	191	300	3.64	1.00
	%	16.7	19.7	45.3	18.3	63.6	100		

Indication: 1: Totally Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Undecided; 4: Agree; 5: Totally Agree. T: Overall Total; TD: Total Disagree; TA: Total Agree; M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation.

Table 2. Correlation coefficient of student's attitudes towards gender belief.

Item	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Belief		
Age	-0.29	0.00 ^{**}
Gender	0.04	0.46
Race	-0.17	0.00 [*]
Education	-0.21	0.00 [*]
Hometown	0.04	0.45
Father's educational level	0.04	0.53
Mother's educational level	0.08	0.18
Family members studying/studied at university	-0.02	0.77

Significant levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

3.2. Attitudes towards Equal Ability

The study measures student's attitudes towards equal ability of males and females for various roles using seven statements. **Table 3** summarized student's attitudes towards equality of male and female ability aspects. The results revealed that more favorable attitudes was found "Boys and girls should have equal opportunity and should not be treated differently" (77.03% agree). The moderate favorable attitude was found "The world will be a better place when women become leaders" (63% agree). The results revealed the least favourable attitude was in terms of "Girls have the better ability to perform as the religious leaders than boys" (41.3% agree). For the other statements, the majority of respondents showed traditional gender norms about the equal ability between men and women.

For example, a large number of respondents (83.6% agree) in terms of "Girls are better suited than boys in

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards equal ability aspect.

ITEM		1	2	TD	3	4	5	TA	T	M	SD
Boys and girls have similar intelligence and abilities	F	13	88	101	53	94	52	146	300	3.28	1.18
	%	4.3	29.3	33.6	17.7	31.3	17.3	48.6	100		
It is more difficult for a girl than for a boy to stand up on a train or bus	F	17	51	68	46	131	55	186	300	3.52	1.14
	%	5.7	17.0	22.7	15.3	43.7	18.3	62.0	100		
Girls have the better ability to perform as the religious leaders than boys	F	28	76	104	72	93	31	124	300	3.08	1.16
	%	9.3	25.3	34.6	24.0	31.0	10.3	41.3	100		
Girls are better suited than boys in doing child care and household works	F	6	18	24	25	127	124	251	300	4.15	0.95
	%	2.0	6.0	8.0	8.3	42.3	41.3	83.6	100		
Boys are better at doing work outside of the home	F	8	20	28	28	136	108	244	300	4.05	0.98
	%	2.7	6.7	9.4	9.3	45.3	36.0	81.3	100		
The world will be a better place when women become leaders	F	50	100	150	87	45	18	63	300	2.60	1.11
	%	16.7	33.3	50.0	29.0	15.0	6.0	11.0	100		
Boys and girls should have equal opportunity and should not be treated differently	F	5	25	27	38	135	97	232	300	3.98	0.97
	%	1.7	8.3	10.0	12.7	45.0	32.3	77.3	100		

Indication: 1: Totally Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Undecided; 4: Agree; 5: Totally Agree. T: Overall Total; TD: Total Disagree; TA: Total Agree; M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation.

doing child care and household works” which was negative attitudes towards equitable gender norms. A similar number of respondents (81.3%) showed negative attitudes towards equality in terms of “Boys are better at doing work outside of the home”. The overall results showed negative attitudes towards equality on ability aspects.

Correlations: Socioeconomic Variable and Attitudes towards Equal Ability Aspect

With respect to the relationship between socioeconomic variables and equal ability between men and women, the results are presented in **Table 4** revealed that age ($r = 0.21$; $p < 0.01$), gender ($r = 0.19$; $p < 0.01$) and education ($r = 0.01$; $p < 0.05$) were significantly associated with students' attitudes about gender ability. The significant value greater than ($p = 0.00$ and $p = 0.01$). Previous studies [15] [16] found the relationship between student's gender role attitudes and their educational status.

The other variables such as race, hometown, fathers' educational level and mothers' educational level had a weak relationship with student's attitudes towards equitable and inequitable gender relation to ability.

3.3. Attitudes towards Moral Values

With regards to moral aspects, a total of five statements was employed in this study and the results are presented in **Table 5**. The most favourable attitudes were found in terms of “Boys and girls should have equal opportunity according to their needs” (88.3 percent agree). Similarly, a large number of respondents agreed (79.0 percent) that boys should be encouraged to do what boys are naturally good at, and girls should be encouraged to do what they are naturally good at. Only a few respondents disagreed (9.0 percent) and undecided (12.0 percent) respectively. The least favourable attitudes were found in terms of “Assets should be distributed equally between son and daughters” (59.0 percent agree). However, the moderate favourable attitudes were noted in terms of “Boys and girls should have equal responsibility for household work and child care” (86 percent agree). From these results, it can conclude that the majority of the respondents had positive attitudes toward gender equality on moral value aspects.

Correlations: Socioeconomic Variable and Attitudes towards Moral Values

As mentioned elsewhere, the study determines the relationship between socioeconomic variables and student's attitudes towards equality on three aspects such as ability, belief and moral aspects. This section examines the relationship on moral aspects and the results revealed (**Table 6**) that gender ($r = 0.24$; $p < 0.01$), race ($r = 0.28$; $p <$

Table 4. Correlation coefficient of student's attitudes towards ability.

Items	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Ability		
Age	-0.21	0.00**
Gender	-0.19	0.00**
Race	-0.06	0.34
Education	-0.13	0.03*
Hometown	0.04	0.46
Father's educational level	-0.10	0.08
Mother's educational level	-0.02	0.68
Family members studying/studied at university	-0.01	0.85

Significant levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5. Students' attitudes towards moral values.

ITEM		1	2	TD	3	4	5	TA	T	M	SD
Boys and girls should have equal opportunity according to their needs	F	4	11	15	20	166	99	265	300	4.15	0.80
	%	1.3	3.7	5.0	6.7	55.3	33.0	88.3	100		
Boys should be encouraged to do what boys are naturally good at, and girls should be encouraged to do what they are naturally good at	F	6	21	27	36	138	99	237	300	4.01	0.96
	%	2.0	7.0	9.0	12.0	46.0	33.0	79.0	100		
Boys and girls should have equal responsibility for household work and child care	F	2	21	23	19	144	114	258	300	4.16	0.87
	%	0.7	7.0	7.7	6.3	48.0	38.0	86.0	100		
If girls have the leadership quality, she should be encouraged that position	F	6	30	36	35	169	60	229	300	3.82	0.93
	%	2.0	10.0	12.0	11.7	56.3	20.0	76.3	100		
Assets should be distributed equally between son and daughters	F	28	47	75	48	117	60	177	300	3.45	1.24
	%	9.3	15.7	25.0	16.0	39.0	20.0	59.0	100		
Girls should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with me	F	2	20	22	65	157	56	213	300	3.82	0.84
	%	0.7	6.7	7.4	21.7	52.3	18.7	71.0	100		

Indication: 1: Totally Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Undecided; 4: Agree; 5: Totally Agree. T: Overall Total; TD: Total Disagree; TA: Total Agree; M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation.

Table 6. Correlation coefficient of student's attitudes towards moral values.

Item	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Moral values		
Age	-0.11	0.05
Gender	-0.24	0.00**
Race	0.28	0.00**
Education	-0.01	0.09
Hometown	0.17	0.00**
Father's educational level	0.07	0.23
Mother's educational level	0.07	0.25
Family members studying/studied at university	0.01	0.86

0.01) and hometown ($r = 0.174$; $p < 0.01$) were significantly and positively related to student's attitudes towards equality related to moral values. The other variables such as age ($r = 0.11$), education ($r = -0.01$), father's educational level ($r = 0.07$), mother's educational level ($r = 0.07$) and family members of studying or studied at university ($r = 0.01$) had a weak relationship on student's attitudes towards equality on this aspect.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The study examined student's attitudes towards equality in two educational institutions in the states of Perak and Selangor, Malaysia. The study measured student's attitudes with the aspects of beliefs, ability and moral about the equality in the suitability of males and females for various roles. The first analysis provided the frequencies and percentages of responses to the gender role attitudes towards equality. The results of the study showed that most of the respondents documented positive attitudes towards equality in terms of boys' and girls' equal ability, boys' and girls' equal opportunity according to their respective needs and so on. This study seeks to contribute to showing how socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents would impact on their gender role attitudes towards equality. The findings of the study demonstrated that age, race, and education were positively associated with a student's attitudes towards equality with belief aspect while gender and education were positively associated with a student's attitudes towards equality with ability aspect. Moral values were also correlated with gender; race and hometown were significantly and positively related to student's attitudes towards equality. Based on the finding, the study provides several implications. Firstly, with respect to gender beliefs and value aspects, although an overwhelming acceptance was observed among student's attitudes; traditional norms were noted especially on ability aspects. Given the importance of student's favorable attitude towards equality for the social and economic prosperity of the country, the study, therefore, suggests that students are required to access gender education that may change traditional ideology as well as to achieve the goal of equality between men and women in the community. Secondly, in order to gather depth knowledge of gender, more research-oriented components could be included in each study program at higher learning institutions. Seminars, forums and discussions can be held relating to gender issues that would increase student's knowledge on the issue. Thirdly, further research is needed to explore the factors that play a role in the development of non-traditional ideology among Malaysian university students' attitudes towards gender equality in the society.

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