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The Meaning of Faith and Transformation of Religious Practices among Muslim Middle-Aged Career Women

(Makna Agama dan Transformasi Amalan Agama dalam Kalangan Wanita Islam Bekerjaya Pertengahan Usia)

SITI MARZIAH ZAKARIA & BAZILAH RAIHAN MAT SHAWAL

ABSTRACT

Middle-aged career women looking to assess the improvements brought on by life, would probably give some forethought to their aging years, like where they have gone to, and what they have been doing. They reassess their priorities and make changes to their goals and orientations to command a higher purpose in all aspects of life. Many theorists believe, an older woman's successful navigation of work-life balance is associated with her having a strong faith. Thus, a qualitative research was conducted to explore the meaning of faith from the perspectives of middle-aged Muslim career women. It also identified the transformation of religious practices performed by these women as they reach middle life. A few rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 middle-aged Muslim working class women from different levels of education, career, income and health. The research adopted a purposive maximum variation sampling technique in order to have a variety in the respondents' profiles, before transcribing and analysing all interview data in Nvivo software. What followed was a thematic analysis to identify themes and sub-themes of the data. The results showed that the respondents' perspectives on faith rested on four meanings; 1) guide and way of life, 2) principle of life, 3) obedience, and 4) source of peace. This research also identified five central themes of the transformation being investigated; 1) inculcating religious values, 2) attending religious talks, 3) reciting and understanding the Quran, 4) improving the quality of prayer, and 5) dhikr and supplication were cited as the most visible manifestations of the transformation. It is hoped that these findings will provide a clearer understanding into the spiritual and internal growth of middle-aged Muslim career women. Apart from strengthening the works on developmental psychology in Malaysia, this research can tap on contribution opportunities, ranging from benefiting counsellors and social workers in their programs planning to enhance the psychological well-being of middle-aged Muslim working class women in Malaysia.

Keywords: Women; middle-aged; meaning of faith; transformation of religious practices; life satisfaction

ABSTRAK

Wanita pertengahan usia yang ingin menilai penambahbaikan yang dibawa oleh kehidupan, pasti akan mengingat kembali di mana mereka sebelum ini dan apa yang mereka telah lakukan sepanjang usia. Dalam fasa ini, mereka menilai semula apa yang penting dan membuat perubahan pada matlamat dan orientasi bagi memenuhi tujuan hidup yang lebih tinggi. Para ahli teori berpendapat, kejayaan seseorang wanita dalam menjaga keseimbangan antara kerjaya dan kehidupan adalah kerana keteguhan iman yang timbul dalam jiwanya. Justeru, kajian berbentuk kualitatif ini telah meneroka makna iman dari perspektif wanita Islam pertengahan umur bekerjaya, juga mengenal pasti transformasi amalan agama yang dilakukan oleh mereka apabila mereka mencapai usia ini. Temu bual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan untuk 10 wanita Islam pertengahan umur dari latar belakang yang berbeza pendidikan, kerjaya, pendapatan dan tahap kesihatan. Kaedah persampelan yang digunakan ialah persampelan bertujuan, iaitu dengan menggunakan teknik varians maksimum bagi mendapatkan kepelbagaian dalam profil responden. Proses temu bual mengambil masa antara 45 minit hingga satu jam. Input temu bual kemudian ditaip dan diproses menggunakan Nvivo. Seterusnya, tema dan sub-tema data dikenal pasti menggunakan analisis bertema. Hasil analisis mendapati bahawa responden menyatakan empat makna agama daripada perspektif mereka, iaitu; 1) sebagai panduan

dan cara hidup, 2) sebagai prinsip hidup, 3) ketaatan, dan 4) sumber keamanan. Sementara itu, dari segi transformasi amalan agama, lima tema amalan utama terhasil; 1) memupuk nilai-nilai agama, 2) menghadiri ceramah agama, 3) membaca dan memahami Al-Quran, 4) meningkatkan kualiti solat, dan 5) zikir dan doa. Penemuan ini memberikan pemahaman lebih jelas mengenai pertumbuhan rohani dan dalaman wanita pertengahan umur. Ia seterusnya menyumbang kepada kekuatan psikologi perkembangan di Malaysia, selain memberi manfaat kepada kaunselor dan pekerja sosial dalam perancangan program bagi meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologi wanita Islam pertengahan umur di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Wanita; pertengahan usia; makna agama; transformasi amalan agama; kepuasan hidup

INTRODUCTION

The middle age, as they call it, is the period in your life when you are no longer young, but have not yet become old. Given its short time horizon which is usually between the ages of 40 and 60, The American Heritage Medical Dictionary defined middle age as the time of human life between youth and old age, usually counted as the years between 40 and 60, which is also known as the midlife years (2007). While the middle life is said to be a challenging and complex phase for middle-aged adults due to their diverse experiences, in some way or the other, each of them shares some common themes with regard to both losses and gains (Baltes, Staudinger & Lindenberger 1999). If they were being completely honest with themselves, the main concerns are health, welfare and well-being (Lachman 2001). And while anyone can fall sick, middle-aged adults are particularly at risk, for the simple reason being that many have been diagnosed with chronic illnesses and physical problems such as hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease and arthritis that may cause depression. Spotting a good coping strategy is far from a transparent and straightforward process, but having faith definitely can be a source of support in times of need.

The threat of physical, cognitive and emotional inefficiency increases as women become middle-aged, and they often have to learn to accept the deterioration of these aspects. It is around this time that the women also start to seek fulfillment and change through personal growth, particularly after they have gone through various experiences throughout life. In fact, their views on faith concurrently change with the shifts in the perspective of life (Costello 2012). The motivational high the women feel after rediscovering their faith often translates into the perception of well-being or life's satisfaction. At this point, they will always make

choices, choose what to do, think of how to allocate time and utilize resources, and re-evaluate entire aspects of life (Santrock 2011). Santrock (2011) was possibly one of the many firsts to proclaim that individuals of middle age will begin to look back where they were before and what they have done in life. They look forward to seeing how much longer the remaining time, for them to do what is expected in life.

Howell (2001) fairly pointed out that middle age is a phase to redefine identity, goal and orientation of life. It is like being an ageing teenager. It is a phase of life changes which involves reassessment and achievement. And most women who were interviewed from different backgrounds described middle age as a phase of hope and rebirth. In reality, women of middle age will direct their focus on how do they want to live their lives and what is important to them (Howell 2001). Aside from the motivational high, what also continues to drive middle-aged women forward are the opportunities for self-reflection and exploring new ways to live a more meaningful life. However, the impact seems to be great for middle-aged women who suffer loss of meaning in their world. If their lost is left untreated, it may lead to feelings of deep sorrow, depression, emotional silence and loneliness. And because of this reason, the practices of faith in essence, are the spiritual boost that can help stimulate healthy lifestyle and provide gateway for human suffering, be it mental, emotional, spiritual or physical (Suicide Prevention Resource Center 2008).

For many, middle life can be a time for internal development. A phase that tells them how to turn their lives around, from directing inward toward what they lack (deficiency motivations) to seeking material that motivates them to do better (growth motivations). Growth motivation is influenced by

the needs of humans to achieve their full potential. Thus, individuals in middle age group are working advertently toward understanding what they need in order to rediscover who they are and what they want in this phase of life. For those who need the help of spiritual guidance, faith will give them a sense of direction, purpose and meaning in life. It is simply possible that faith may provide them the capacity to visualize and pursue long-term goals. In fact, the hope for final reward, a component that is the basis for religious practices, offers direction and spurs motivation (World Economic Forum 2016).

Without this kind of faith to drive them forward, many middle-aged women would give up in the face of great adversity. Bagheri (2012) said, faith in Islam is the belief that provides guidance and coping strategies, promotes pro-social behavior and gives priority to the family. Maslow (1971) echoed this by pointing out that, the essence of faith is a joyous experience, or an integrated self-belief. Taylor (2007) described faith as representations of feeling, thinking, and acting which provide life meaning and purpose. It is also a growing network of symbols, myths, and ritual.

In addition to postmodern discussions of faith, Spiro (1987) believed, faith carries various meanings depending on the context it is being used. According to him, there is no comprehensive definition of faith as agreed by all philosophers, which is in line with Tillich's (1963) opinion, who described faith as a set of values that provide answers to our questions about the meaning of life. McIntosh (1995) on the other hand, suggested that faith is a cognitive process to help people find meaning in life after experiencing loss of loved ones. He considered it as a cognitive structure that contains prior knowledge arranged according to domains which will help improve the well-being of those who thrive on the power of faith.

Bear in mind that the study on the transformation of religious practices has been done by a number of researchers. However, most of them tend to focus on elderly people as their sample of study. Since there is so much more to consider when studying about faith, this research will focus on the changes in religious practices or rituals, among middle-aged Muslim career women. In other view, Hasmah (2005) who explored the religious practices, faith and satisfaction among the elderly in Kuching, Sarawak, found that religious commitment are related to its practices, faith and satisfaction. According to Taslima (2016), in order to create a

more serene sense of being, elderly people would attempt to enhance their religiosity by improving rituals or *ibadah* (practices) and good deeds. They consistently perform prayers in congregation or *jamaah*, recite the Quran and make more dhikr (utter remembrance of God), while actively seeking beneficial knowledge through books and rapport building. As their age increases, middle-aged Muslim career women may gradually put an effort in enhancing their relationship with God and fellow humans.

A collection of literature reviews by sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists decades ago suggested that, the meaning of faith is a component that has rarely been studied in this contemporary era. Particularly for a certain age group, it is hard to contemplate why the subject of faith has received less attention among them. Attempting to change this scenario, Howell (2001) offered socially-conscious thoughts about the middle age, reiterating that it is a phase to reinvent one self, thus the growing awareness on faith is vital to be explored. Similarly, the change and transformation in terms of religious practices that reflect a commitment to faith, also needs to be looked into. Facing the pressure of balancing work and family, middle-aged Muslim career women sometimes struggle to hold onto their faith and dreams. Specific situations such as unfavourable working hours and a high stress level are thought to affect their psychological well-being. Hence, the role of faith from the perspectives of middle-aged Muslim career women literally begged to be explored and understood in order to plan the targeted intervention to help them live a satisfying life. This study also aims to fulfil two objectives, which are:

1. Explore the meaning of faith from the perspectives of middle-aged Muslim career women.
2. Explore the extent of improvement in middle-aged Muslim career women's religious practices.

This was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with those selected through a maximum variation technique, which means the respondents were selected based on their differences in education level, occupation, income and age. Each in-depth interview, which took approximately one hour, sought to explore the perspectives, interpretations and unique experiences

of the respondents. Ten middle-aged women who currently work and live in Hulu Langat, Selangor made up the sample under study. They were selected based on a purposive sampling, which set a number of characteristics for the sample. Those characteristics were; career women, Muslim, have monthly income, age between 40 and 59, working and living in Hulu Langat, Selangor, and Malaysian resident.

The results were analyzed using an Nvivo software to extract the research's themes and sub-themes, while a thematic analysis was performed to identify words that were often repeated. Subsequent data collection were confirmed by two (2) methods, namely peer review and member checks, to bolster the credibility of the findings. The background of the respondents in detail is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Background of the Respondents

Participant	Location	Age	Health Condition	Occupation	Education	Status
1	Ampang	59	Good	Consultant	Degree	Married
2	Kajang	53	Good	Entrepreneur	SPM	Married
3	Kajang	46	Good	Entrepreneur	STPM	Married
4	Cheras	45	Good	Clerk	STPM	Married
5	Kajang	53	Good	Entrepreneur	STPM	Married
6	Cheras	47	Moderate	Clerk	SPM	Married
7	Ampang	45	Moderate	Clerk	SPM	Married
8	Ampang	52	Good	Journalist	STPM	Married
9	Kajang	43	Good	Officer	Diploma	Married
10	Ampang	44	Moderate	X-ray Asst.	Diploma	Married

FINDINGS

THE MEANING OF FAITH

The thematic analysis showed the meaning of faith as the main theme. In view of this, the meaning of faith was refined by four sub-themes, namely:

1) a guide and a way of life, 2) a principle of life, 3) obedience, and 4) a source of peace.

Most respondents agreed that faith is a component that provides guidelines to the way of life. Faith generally delineates the way of life that should be followed by a Muslim. To the respondents, life without religion is like a life with no direction. Giving even more evidence to the power of faith, religion provides the respondents with supportive spiritual guidance on the preservation of modesty through dress codes, and how to foster family ties amidst fueling economic problems and undermining politics and so forth, as one respondent argued:

Without religion, life has no sense of direction. Prayers are the pillars of the religion, and the sunnah (the prophet's way) helps us observe our dress code and the

consequences of our actions. For instance, a father will be responsible for his daughter's wrongdoings. Faith is important, very important. (Respondent 4).

This statement was supported by the other respondents under study who asserted that all actions in life must be guided by faith. One respondent added that faith should never be ignored in decision making. For her, the obligatory prayers are the foundation of faith. They are the essential part of the religion that needs attention. "We uphold faith as our belief and way of life. Our actions must be based on the faith. In principle, do not miss prayers." (Respondent 9).

More importantly, almost all the respondents agreed that faith is a way of life. In addition, it is a life principle which cannot be compromised as it represents the Muslim's identity. Muslims who abide by the faith, would not be easily tempted by intriguing enticements or trade their religion for worldly temptations. Their beliefs should be secured throughout their life. They will do whatever it takes to protect their faith with their property, knowledge and even with life itself, as stated by

Respondent 3: “Faith is related to our belief, right? For Muslims, it (faith) must exist. For people who have no religious belief, it’s like they are missing out on experiencing peace in their lives.”

Other than the above stated arguments, some respondents associated faith with the act of obedience to God’s commandments. Undivided obedience means fulfilling what is commanded and leaving what is forbidden by Allah. It is quite difficult, but every practicing Muslim will try his or her best to obey. As a servant of Allah, the importance of voluntary obedience to Him is clear, as pointed out by Respondent 7: “By living according to Allah’s commandments and prohibitions, we place emphasis on our life as His servant above all else.” Respondent 8 said: “In adhering to the teachings of Islam, do what you are told to do and avoid doing prohibited things. The most important thing is never skip a prayer.” Another respondent reiterated on the importance of faith, saying that the daily life of a Muslim should be heavily influenced by Islamic teachings as it needs to be practiced as a lifestyle.

Setting aside all definitions, faith to most respondents is undoubtedly a source of tranquility. They reportedly feel a deep sense of serenity when engaged in religious practices and the unquestionable believe in Allah’s rewards through extraordinary deeds. Most forms of tranquility are proven to be felt by worshippers when they practice the religion and its values such as patience, gratitude, approval (*redha*) and reliance (*tawakkal*) in the face of adversity. Respondent 1 argued: “To me, faith motivates me to continue to do good. To do good things, and continue to do well with others. And so then, faith gives me peace.”

In this study, those with faith believe that problems or obstacles are presented to them as a form of test from Allah. Thus, people who are pleased (*redha*) will be able to deal with the challenges steadily, as expressed by Respondent 7: “We must be pleased with the challenges given by Allah and accept them with an open heart. We must remind ourselves that He is testing us, to see to what extent our patience is.” Another respondent added: “Having faith has indeed helped me find solutions, coupled by continuous effort, prayer and reliance on Allah. I simply thrive to face the next day.” Respondent 8 is always thankful with any situation in life, as she believes there are other people who are facing much harder tests. In view of this, she learned to be patient and tolerant. “If we

find our challenges difficult, others’ challenges may be even worse. So we have to be grateful and learn to accept them with perseverance and strength.”

It was also interesting to note that the respondents’ definition of faith changes as their age increases. In short, faith has a substantial and significant meaning to the lives of middle-aged Muslim career women in this study. As Carl Jung stated, the spiritual aspect is the main focus after entering middle age as people have the awareness that life is not eternal (Butler-Bowdon, 2017). Middle age is the age to reinstate self-exploration and create a new meaning of life.

TRANSFORMATION IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

At this age, the respondents admitted to constantly looking for ways to change themselves and their lifestyles for the better. Many began to cover up their *awrah* (dignity) properly in this age. Some even began to re-learn about Islam by going to the mosques often. The Muslim career women at this age are increasingly aware that their age is coming to an end. Thus, they improve on the obligatory religious rituals and increase the recommended rituals. A total of five sub-themes were derived from the analysis on the transformation of the respondents’ religious practices, which were, 1) inculcating religious values, 2) attending religious talk, 3) reciting and understanding the Qur’an, 4) improving the quality of prayers and 5) dhikr (remembrance) and supplication (du’a).

Most of the respondents revealed that they have always nurtured the value of faith in the lives of their children. The children were commanded to pray five times daily, fast during Ramadan and safeguard their dignity, although Respondent 1 stressed on the challenge of preaching: “In terms of practising and educating my children with the belief and principles, I simply ask them to perform the prayers and fast, but I have no strength to preach (make dakwah).”

Respondent 2 agreed with Respondent 1, saying that: “I have nurtured faith and belief in my children. I have always reminded them to perform the prayers although they are all grown up. In terms of dress code, when we want to go somewhere, I will observe what they wear.” This indicated that the respondents were firm in fostering faith in their children by cultivating the importance of prayer and fasting from when the children were growing up. The respondents believe that faith must always be nurtured and reminded from a young age.

In addition, the respondents reported that they now attend religious talks more frequently as they move into the middle age. The mosque has become a place for them to seek religious knowledge like *fardu ain* and rituals of Hajj, as well as to learn about the interpretation and recitation of the Quran. Respondent 1 said: "I now go to the mosque more than usual. For religious talks, if I don't attend them, I can still hear them from my (house) window and buy some books." Respondent 8, 5 and 6 also admitted to attending religious talks on a regular basis. When asked what kind of religious practices she normally does, Respondent 8 said: "Read the *Yasin* (the 36th chapter of the Quran) every Friday night and listen to lots of religious talks."

All of these women were reportedly busy with managing their children and work in the past. However, they now have more time to attend religious talks at the mosque as their children have all grown up. As for the respondents who have flexible working schedules, they have even more opportunities to attend the talks. Some were even more fortunate than the others as their employers were the ones who took the initiative to organize such talks at the office. This holistic approach to wellness in offices will benefit employees as they will have the chance to increase their religious knowledge while at work. Some respondents, who are IT savvy, reportedly took the opportunity to listen to religious lectures on the Internet such as through YouTube. They try to work with existing resources and technology wherever possible instead of attending a complete talk at a religious center as this would be more convenient and cost-effective. When asked to describe, in their own words, how faith helped them cope with stress, Respondent 3 explained: "The utmost helpful remedy is prayer. After that, it is the Quran. If you are unable to go to the mosque for lectures, you can still catch up on the Internet. Those are the things that made us strong."

The respondents also said that, they recite the Quran more often now and understand it better at this age. They do not just recite the Quran, but also practise what it preaches, as one respondent pointed out: "I continuously recite the Quran and would at least recite the whole Book (*khatam*) twice a year. During the fasting month, I would definitely complete reciting the Quran once." Respondent 3 and 10, the same women who reportedly recite the *Yasin* every Friday night, also said that they often recite the Quran with the aim to comprehend its

meaning. To them, a mere recital is not enough without trying to understand the interpretation of the verses. There were some respondents, however, who make the recitation of the Quran as their daily routine.

Regardless of the endless list of possibilities that can be considered, the results suggested a strong awareness among the middle-aged Muslim career women on the importance of the Quran in their lives. Apart from being the root of their quest for achieving tranquility, the Quran is also the reference book that has provided the answers to solving the respondents' problems. The strength of the Quran motivates them to constantly recite it and study its contents, as described by Respondent 3: "Apart from just reciting the Quran, I have also started learning how to interpret the meaning of its verses."

It is during midlife that the majority of the respondents reported of making improvements to the quality of their prayers. They now put greater emphasis on performing each prayer at the beginning of prayer time and never skipping a prayer. They frequently perform non-obligatory prayers like *tahajjud* (midnight prayer) and *duha* (chast prayer) in order to reap its rewards. When asked about the typical acts of worship performed after reaching the age of 40, Respondent 6 said: "I perform more (prayers), pray on time, perform non-obligatory prayers (*sunat*) and recite the Quran." Respondent 1 revealed: "I perform the *duha* and *tahajjud* prayers. And when it is about time for my child to sit for an exam, I will perform the *hajjat* prayer for as long as the exam duration. If the exam takes two hours, then I'll perform the *hajjat* for two hours. I have created that habit in me."

Respondent 3 showed seriousness in maintaining the quality of her prayers. For her, the quality of prayer should increase with age, together with an appreciation for the meaning of dhikr (utter remembrance of Allah) and by simply being more focused (*khusyuk*) during each prayer. She said:

"I used to pray for the sake of praying, but now I perform the prayers as a sign of gratitude as I have come to realize that we are all indeed the servants of Allah. We have to worship Him because we were created as His slaves. The five time obligatory prayers a day should be fulfilled. If possible, have a greater appreciation for the dhikr recited during prayers so that your prayers will be of high quality. With regard to the non-obligatory prayers, we just do it as much as we can."

Prayer was also used as a positive coping strategy in times of trouble. Most of the respondents admitted to having started on performing non-obligatory night prayers at this age. The non-obligatory prayers have become their daily routine, as Respondent 4 pointed out: "I perform a lot of the prayers of repentance (*taubat*) and *duha*, as though I have a lot of time in my hands. I found it okay to wake up in the middle of the night to perform the prayers as there is nothing much to do." Apparently, the respondents feel a sense of closeness to Allah at this stage of their lives too. Prayer is not only performed as a means of asking Allah for help and assistance, but also as a sign of devotion, gratitude and hope in Allah's mercy. They feel better equipped to face any challenges as they reinforce their dependence on Allah. Apart from that, prayer has been considered as a source of strength and lifeline for Allah's servants, in order to connect with their Creator.

Finally, remembrance (*dhikr*) and supplication (*du'a*) is the last sub-theme for the transformation of religious practices under study. It was discovered that remembrance and salutation are the closest practices to the hearts of middle-aged women. When they are tested with a problem in their marriage or career, they would invoke the Creator's name, uttering all words of glory and praise to Allah in order to get a peace of mind. Remembrance is a form of purification for the heart when it is experiencing anxiety, frustration and anger. Respondent 4 stated the benefits of remembrance and supplication, saying that: "Usually I'll perform a prayer, followed by a *dhikr* recitation or remembrance of Allah. I feel more relaxed by doing so, or if I ever want to get angry or cry, I will remember Allah through *dhikr* and submit myself to Him."

More commonly known to the respondents as a coping mechanism in response to adversity, faith, according to Respondent 9, is the primary Muslim belief that has helped her through the demands of her days. "All these times, religion has helped me find the solutions to problems, coupled with continuous efforts, prayers and a total submission to Allah (*tawakkal*). I feel more relaxed to face the days ahead. When asked about the sources of faith for the wounded heart, Respondent 8 enthused: "Remembrance and supplication are gifts for the believers in times of need. All problems come from Allah, so through prayers and recitation of the Quran, we will live in peace."

Many theorists believe, an older woman's successful navigation of work-life balance is associated with her having a strong faith. Apparently, this was true for the respondents. Faith has played a very important role in shaping who they are today. Apart from becoming more focused in strengthening their relationship with Allah, their religious practices are clearly reflected in the improved quality of their prayers, their conscious commitment in attending religious talks, their daily relationship with the Quran, and in their utterance of *dhikr* and supplication. But it isn't just the beauty faithful living holds that drives their interest in the religion. It's more on cultivating their minds on the importance of accumulating eternal rewards that makes them want to enhance their religiosity and understand the Quran. As time passed, the respondents became assured of their life, indicating signs of relaxation and happiness when they shifted their focus from worldly matters to trying to enhance their religious knowledge. Their once palpable sorrow and disappointment were clearly treated when they remembered Allah with a sense of a renewed faith.

DISCUSSION

There is no universal definition of faith for each of us understand, experience and express it differently. Faith means different things to different people (Matthes 2000). It may include one's ultimate belief and values; a sense of meaning and a purpose in life; a sense of connectedness or a sense of identity. Faith is believed to have played an important role in the lives of the respondents. They claimed to be more religious after reaching their 40s, as they enhance their religious practices such as praying, reciting the Qur'an, uttering the *dhikr* and making *du'a*. The respondents also reported that they felt a sense of tranquillity after every daily religious practice. A further look into the meaning of faith found that, the respondents relied heavily on religion to guide them through life and by upholding the religion means obedience to God's commandments.

The middle-aged Muslim career women in this study admitted to adopting many changes in the practice of religion as they are getting older. Apparently, for a woman, the age factor plays an important role in strengthening her appreciation of faith. As Zimmer et al. (2016) fairly pointed out,

older people tend to have higher rates of involvement in religious and/or spiritual endeavours compared to the younger ones. Being an important coping mechanism for this age group, faith is also known as a form of social support, particularly when the respondents were going through tough times. As the aging process affects one's faith, some of the events within the later stages of life may swift spiritual growth or promote a restoration of the religious life. Two major questions were raised during this study; what gives us meaning and satisfaction; and where do we derive our purpose for living?

The respondents experienced a sense of closeness to Allah when they were tested with a variety of problems. The most common religious practices which they performed in order to attain spiritual strength were, among others, the *tahajjud* and *duha* prayers together with supplications. This practise was in line with the study by Roberts et al. (1997) who found that, 49% of gynaecological cancer patients adhere more to the faith after they suffer from the disease. As Park and Folkman (1997) suggested, faith gives hope and support to people when they are in trouble. Besides that, faith also gives meaning and purpose to life (Comptom & Hoffman, 2013). Apparently, the respondents did feel that their lives became more meaningful when they engaged in different practices to increase their faith. They even said to be happier and more satisfied with their lives (Diener et al. 1999).

Loads of researches have been done to examine the impact of spirituality on psychological well-being. Most of them revealed that, spirituality is an important indicator for well-being. Ivtzan et al. (2011) confirmed the importance of spirituality on psychological well-being, regardless of whether it is experienced through religious participation. Spirituality has also been proved to play a positive and significant role in giving a sense of identity and providing a network of social support, as Elliott and Hayward pointed out in 2007. It can protect individuals against suicide or substance misuse as they believe there is a supreme power who is the most merciful and most compassionate (Moreira-Almeida, Neto & Koenig 2006).

Heart-breaking events like earthquakes have really challenged the meaning of life and faith for many. These events have led people to seek spiritual comfort (Mcintosh et al. 2011). A significant way to achieve spiritual comfort is obviously by performing religious rituals. As middle-aged women are vulnerable to multiple life

crises and changes, they need a protective factor in facing those situations. Thus, performing prayers, reciting the Quran and dhikr will help them cope with the stress associated with crisis. Faith, as the name suggests, will truly be a significant source of peace for them. Fowler (1981) proclaimed:

Faith is so fundamental that none of us can live well for very long without it, so universal that when we move beneath the symbols, rituals and ethical patterns that express it, faith is recognizably the same phenomenon in Christians, Marxists, Hindus and Dinka, yet it is so infinitely varied that each person's faith is unique." (p. 321).

"The most generic and most profound process of being human, the process of meaning-making, is faith. Faith, in his conception, is therefore often but not necessarily religious. (p. 321).

Nonetheless, it's crucial that we carry out adequate research into the act of faith as this study had only explored the meaning of faith from the perspectives of middle-aged Muslim career women. The findings may be different for Muslim men. In terms of the transformation in religious practices during midlife, men and women cannot be measured with the same too, as Deaton pointed out in 2009 that women in older age groups are more pious than the others. However, Deaton's study could not answer why women are said to be more pious than men. Women who are more pious found to be healthier, have supportive friends, more positive with the medical system and less likely to smoke. This finding was supported by Lippman and McIntosh (2010) a year later, who found differences in spiritual beliefs and practices among the population in the US. This study was also limited to Malay middle-aged women working in Hulu Langat, Selangor. Thus, the exploration on the meaning of faith and the transformation of religious practices had only been conducted among the views of Malay Muslims only, which may be different from other religions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations can be made to improve the well-being and spirituality of middle-aged Muslim career women. First of all, these women should be

given more opportunities to enhance their faith by allowing them to attend religious talks, seminars and so forth during working hours, perhaps at least once in a month. In addition, sufficient facilities should be provided at the workplace, such as convenient mosques for them to perform prayers, recite the Quran and have religious discussions. Programs and activities to uplift the faith of middle-aged career women should be organized regularly, as older women who are religious are believed to be psychologically happier and healthier.

This study, covering 10 women mostly aged between 43 and 59, provided a deeper understanding into the spirituality of career women after entering middle age. While the topic has started to gain visibility across the country, it remains one of the least investigated types of developmental psychological research and probably one of the least addressed in national action plans. Most studies in the field of well-being or life satisfaction emphasised more on the achievement of goals, career satisfaction, social support and self-esteem. Therefore, this study will be able to provide an additional layer of insight into the development of middle-aged women, while opening doors to a wide range of spirituality studies. Future studies however, should include investigations on the possible spiritual development of middle-aged men, as the men may also experience a spiritual shift as the women. Therefore, common religious practices performed by men of middle age, the frequency of these practices, and their expectations and life goals after reaching middle age are among the areas that need to be studied. Future studies nonetheless, can also be taken with more appropriate methods to help identify ways to strengthen faith among middle-aged women, thus contributing to a complete understanding of the spiritual development of adults in midlife.

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Siti Marziah Zakaria (corresponding author)
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi
Selangor
Malaysia
E-mail: marziah@ukm.edu.my

Bazilah Raihan Mat Shawal
Centre for Language and Generic Studies
Universiti Malaysia Kelantan
Locked Bag 01
16300 Bachok
Kelantan
Malaysia
E-mail: bazilah@umk.edu.my

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