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Introduction

On 15 and 16 April 1985, a Colloquium on Women's Studies in Malaysia, organized by the editors, was held at First Residential College, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. The aim of the colloquium was to provide a forum to discuss the work of Malaysian scholars, mainly women, doing original research on topics relating to women in Malaysian society.

The study of the problems of "Third World Women" has been a major component of research undertaken by feminist scholars in Western academic circles, yet all too often the work of Third World women on women's problems in their own countries is ignored or not given sufficient recognition. Moreover, research by Western women in these countries is often biased by the researchers' own experiences of being women in the West. The focus of the colloquium was thus to redress these issues on a practical and theoretical level.

Nineteen contributors presented papers at the colloquium. They included fifteen Malaysian women scholars and two Malaysian men who had all done original research at a post-graduate level on women's issues in Malaysia. Two other participants, including one of the organizers, were Western women who had lived and done extensive research in Malaysia and had shown an awareness of and a sensitivity to the above-mentioned issues.

The nineteen contributions to the colloquium can be grouped around two research themes. The first theme centres on the experience of Malaysian women as wage labourers. Contributions focused in the main on issues relating to the New Economic Policy, in particular the export-oriented industrial strategy which, for the first time, created large-scale employment opportunities for women in the industrial sector. Individual papers dealt with such themes as the social context of female labour migration from rural areas; adjustment to urban life

and factory organization; the actual experiences of the industrial labour process, and the issue of how Malaysian women workers fare under Japanese management. These papers were complemented by papers which focused on historical studies of female labour force participation in Malaysia, and also in a more international perspective on the specificities of the Malaysian case. It is hoped that these papers can eventually be edited and published as a separate volume.

The second research theme forms the basis for the selection of papers which appear in this special focus issue of *SOJOURN*. It is hoped that this publication will provide the reader with an impression of what type of general issues are of interest to contemporary scholars interested in women's studies in Malaysia, and also how this interest is translated into concrete research.

Thus the papers which appear in this issue of *SOJOURN* are representative of the topical, theoretical and thematic interest of current research. Rohana Ariffin's contribution provides the reader with a critical overview of the relevance of Western feminist theoretical constructs to the Malaysian case. Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir explores the place of women, as writers and subjects, in contemporary Malay literature. Rohany Nasir provides a comparative study of women in professional and more traditional careers. Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan deals with an important aspect of women's experience of Islam in Malaysia, while Abdul Samad Hadi's contribution shifts the focus from West to East Malaysia, and from the urban experience to a rural one. Finally, two contributors — Noraini Abdullah and Shamsul A.B. — focus on the theme of women in politics. The collection as a whole demonstrates the promising possibilities for Malaysian scholars to contribute to the evolution and development of an indigenous perspective on women's studies.

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