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Shame on you, boys

Chok Suat Ling

IT'S a bad time for men in academia. Not only are male students greatly outnumbered by their female counterparts in Malaysian universities, it seems Malay males are earning grades that are bad enough to arouse some serious concern.

According to statistics, a gender gap exists where university entry is concerned. The ratio of female to male students is 65:35. This means female students are outperforming the men at pre-university level.

University gatekeepers - the vice-chancellors - confirm this trend continues at tertiary level.

The Government has been concerned enough to direct the Education Ministry to launch a study to determine the reasons behind this phenomenon. If allowed to persist, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently, it might have a negative impact on society in the long run.

Why does this situation exist? Is it a phase that the education system is going through? Are Malay women equipped with better genes compared to their male counterparts? Are they more disciplined? Less inclined to politics? Eating more nutritious food?

Educationists and academics all have their own opinions on the matter. And while the public wait for the results of the official study, their views serve as food for thought.

While they may have dissimilar views on why the imbalance occurs, all agree from the outset that genes have nothing to do with it. Which is in line with what social scientists have surmised, for they have long done away with any kind of analysis which harbours genetics as the main variable of achievement.

For Prof Datuk Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, dean of the faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Malay girls are more "academically intelligent" due to environmental and cultural factors.

"Girls, especially in Malay society, tend to be more confined to their homes. Their participation in co-curricular activities is limited, they don't go to coffeeshops, and they don't stay out late.

"They tend to focus more on studies as they don't spend their time on other activities. While this is also true for the other races, it is particularly so in Malay society."

He points out that there are more "don'ts" in Malay culture compared to others. "Don't do this, don't do that. By age 17, one would already have come across 300,000 don'ts," he says.

Ibrahim says gender specific growth is another factor. Girls, he says, because of the nature of family socialisation, tend to take on more responsibilities. As a result, they mature faster than men.

"Their readiness for learning is developed earlier. Boys are more playful at the same age."

Ibrahim stresses, however, that he is speaking only of academic intelligence. There are, he says, many other kinds of "intelligence", for instance, interpersonal intelligence and linguistic intelligence.

"A boy who drops out and sells kueh may be less academically intelligent but he may be interpersonally intelligent, meaning he can relate to people better and is more streetwise."

The good news, he adds, is that the situation can be turned around with "correct motivational strategies" as the reasons for the imbalance have

more to do with the environment and culture, not nature.

Does he have a plan of action in mind? "The one proposed by the Prime Minister (abolishing the ethnic-based quota system for a specific period of time) is good. Shock treatment will definitely help. Those not performing need this jolt to bring them out of their slumber."

Universiti Malaya History department honorary consultant Prof Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim agrees that male students have more freedom, and this causes them to spend less time on academic pursuits.

The freedom of Malay female students is further curbed by their male peers.

"On campus, the Malay male students watch their female counterparts to make sure they behave or conform to certain behavioural traits. If they feel the girls aren't behaving as they should be, they will report this to the girls' parents. This also happens among the Indian students but not where the Chinese are concerned," he says.

Male students also have more freedom as it is getting easier to pass examinations nowadays.

"It is difficult to fail these days. Students, therefore, have ample time on their hands for other pursuits," Khoo says.

He, however, stresses that the trend - females academically outperforming the males - is also prevalent among the Chinese and Indians.

"Girls are better in routine learning and passing examinations," he says.

Nevertheless, Khoo points out an irony: Girls might get better grades but Malaysian society remains male-dominated.

"Many girls still do not have a strong commitment to forge out a career for themselves. They do well but not many occupy high positions. They get married, have children."

For Universiti Utara Malaysia Vice-Chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Fawzy Mohd Basri, Malay males are generally less ambitious.

"If they are in the kampung, the main thing they aspire for is a motorcycle," he says.

Ahmad Fawzy, however, disagrees with the contention that Malay girls lack freedom. Their roles, he says, are no longer confined to their homes.

He explains their impulse to excel.

"Women, whether single or married, want to be independent. They want to be able to support themselves, their parents, and help their husbands out. So they study hard, for they know that is the way to get what they want."

And then there are leaders whose views veer completely in the other direction. For them, whether girls outperform boys or vice versa is not an issue that is particularly worrying.

"We should not be overly concerned," says Malaysian Youth Council president Saifuddin Abdullah.

The reason: "It is a cycle and we should let nature take its course. The situation will not be permanent."

There are also those who feel that academic achievement is not the sole yardstick of a student's worth.

A New Straits Times reader who wrote in to its Letters page recently put it succinctly: "Academic achievement should be respected, but let us not be overawed into believing that without excellent students the world would stand still."

"What we need to instil in students, whatever their race, is to be serious about study and strive always to be a better person, and to contribute their knowledge to make this a better world to live in."