

Enhancing Women's Legal Awareness of Marital and Post-Marital Rights through a Community Based Legal Literacy Programme: A Retrospective Pretest-Posttest Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Limited knowledge of family law, legal procedures, and available avenues for redress can hinder people especially those who experience marital breakdown or the loss of a spouse, from accessing the protection and remedies available to them. This situation highlights the importance of providing accessible and practical legal education within the community. In response to this need, a face-to-face community-based legal literacy programme was designed to strengthen women's awareness of their marital and post-marital rights. This study evaluated such face-to-face programme entitled "Legal Literacy Programme: Know Your Rights as a Woman", which was conducted on 23 May 2026 at the mosque of Taman Cheras Jaya, Selangor. It addressed women's rights following a husband's death, divorce and polygamy, together with the processes and procedures for filing claims in the Syariah Court. A one-group retrospective pretest-posttest evaluation was conducted using 38 completed questionnaires. Participants rated perceived pre-programme and post-programme knowledge, skills, attitudes and aspirations on a five-point scale. Programme quality was assessed through six additional items, while an open-ended question captured participants' comments. Descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used for the quantitative data, and comments were grouped through descriptive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that all respondents were women, with the majority comprising older and middle-aged participants. Overall, the programme received a highly positive evaluation. The findings also indicated notable improvements in participants perceived knowledge, skills, attitudes, and aspirations following the programme, with all observed differences reaching statistical significance. 15 of the 18 substantive comments explicitly requested continuation, expansion or follow-up programme. The findings indicate substantial perceived short-term gains and strong participant acceptance.

Keywords: Women's legal awareness, Marital rights, post-marital rights, legal literacy, Retrospective pretest-posttest

INTRODUCTION

Women, particularly those facing marital breakdown or the loss of a spouse, often encounter difficulties in understanding and asserting their legal rights. A lack of awareness regarding family law, legal procedures, and available avenues for legal redress may prevent them from effectively accessing the protection, remedies, and

support to which they are entitled. This gap in legal knowledge underscores the need for accessible, practical, and community-oriented legal education that can enhance women's understanding of their rights and available legal remedies. Legal rights may become particularly important during marriage and when marriage ends through divorce or the death of a husband. In the Malaysian Islamic family law context, women may need to understand safeguards connected with polygamy, as well as post-divorce claims such as *mut'ah*, maintenance during *iddah*, child maintenance, custody and matrimonial property. Widowhood may additionally raise questions concerning *iddah*, inheritance, estate planning and financial security (Jabatan Bantuan Guaman Malaysia, n.d.; Abdullah, 2003; Salleh et al., 2020; Azmi et al., 2024).

Legal awareness therefore involves more than recognizing the name of a right. Women must be able to relate a right to their circumstances, identify the relevant institution, prepare supporting documents and understand the steps required to seek a remedy. Malaysian studies show that awareness of post-divorce rights remains uneven and that limited knowledge of rights and procedures can restrict effective access to legal protection (Ismail, 2014; Mustafa & Nasohah, 2022; Paslan, 2024). Legal socialization and perceptions of procedural justice have also been linked to compliance with Islamic family law obligations, reinforcing the need for sustained family-law literacy within the community (Hasbullah et al., 2023).

Community-based legal literacy offers a practical response because it brings legal information into familiar and less intimidating settings. Such programmes can translate legal terminology into plain language, connect rights with realistic situations and provide verified referral pathways. Malaysia's women-focused legal literacy initiatives similarly emphasize understanding, confidence and access to assistance rather than passive information distribution alone (Jabatan Pembangunan Wanita, n.d.). Legal empowerment is most useful when knowledge is linked to individual action and supportive institutions (Joshi, 2017).

In response to this need, a face-to-face community-based legal literacy programme was designed to strengthen women's awareness of their marital and post-marital rights. The programme provides participants with practical information on relevant legal rights, procedures, and available support mechanisms, while creating an interactive space where women can raise questions and discuss issues affecting their everyday lives. Through direct engagement and knowledge-sharing, the programme aims to empower women to make informed decisions and navigate the legal system more confidently.

Against this background, the present study evaluates a face-to-face programme entitled "Legal Literacy Programme: Know Your Rights as a Woman", which was conducted on 23 May 2026 at the mosque of Taman Cheras Jaya, Selangor Malaysia. It was a community programme that introduced women to rights following a husband's death, divorce and polygamy, as well as Syariah Court claim procedures. The study examines participants' assessment of programme quality and their perceived changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes and aspirations. It also analyses written feedback to identify priorities for strengthening future community-based legal literacy programmes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's Marital and Post-Marital Rights under Malaysian Islamic Family Law

The scope of women's family-law rights extends across different stages of marriage. During marriage, questions may arise concerning maintenance, fair treatment and legal safeguards in polygamous unions. After divorce, common claims include *mut'ah*, *hadanah*, child maintenance, maintenance during *iddah* and matrimonial property. The Department of Legal Aid identifies these five as common rights claimed by Muslim women after divorce and also provides guidance on basic documents and filing procedures (Jabatan Bantuan Guaman Malaysia, n.d.).

Post-divorce entitlements are meaningful only when women understand both the substantive right and the procedure for claiming it. *Mut'ah*, for example, functions as a form of protection following divorce, while the growing number of claims has been associated with greater awareness and confidence among women (Abdul Latif & Abdullah, 2013). A survey of 384 Muslim women in Kota Bharu found that difficulties in claiming post-divorce rights often stemmed from limited information, awareness and procedural knowledge; awareness also

differed significantly according to age and education (Ismail, 2014). These findings are consistent with later literature identifying continuing gaps in women's awareness and access to professional guidance (Mustafa & Nasohah, 2022; Paslan, 2024).

Legal literacy concerning polygamy is equally important because the relevant legal framework is intended to regulate the practice and protect existing wives from financial and emotional harm. Abdullah (2003) explains that Islamic family law provides safeguards for women in polygamous marriages. More recent doctrinal analysis shows that failure to comply with legal requirements, including through cross-border marriages, may affect marriage registration, court jurisdiction and the rights of wives and children (Md Salleh et al., 2024).

The death of a husband creates another set of legal, religious and financial concerns. Women may require guidance on iddah, mobility, employment and family responsibilities, areas in which public understanding and practice may be inconsistent (Salleh et al., 2020). Widowhood may also expose women to uncertainty regarding estate planning and access to property. Azmi et al. (2024) therefore emphasize the relevance of hibah and systematic wealth planning as mechanisms that may strengthen financial protection for widows.

In the Malaysian context, research reveals that *sharia* courts are timelier and more flexible in responding to women's claims than in decades past, and that these courts are more inclined to punish husbands who transgress *sharia* family law bearing on women. In addition, women nowadays have far more access to resources for negotiating marriage, its dissolution, and the aftermath (Peletz MG.2018).

Legal Awareness, Access to Justice and Community-Based Legal Literacy

Legal literacy requires participants to understand how legal rules operate in practical situations. A community-based approach places this learning within local social networks and allows women to ask questions before a dispute reaches a critical stage. It can combine explanation of substantive rights with procedural guidance, document preparation, referral information and access to legal professionals. This approach is consistent with legal empowerment scholarship, which treats rights knowledge as effective only when individuals can use it in interaction with institutions and collective support systems (Joshi, 2017).

In the Malaysian context, legal awareness should not be understood merely as the existence of legal provisions, as individuals may possess different understandings of formal legal principles. Moustafa's study demonstrates a significant gap between popular understandings of Islamic law and formal legal theory, highlighting the importance of accessible legal education and awareness initiatives (Moustafa T. 2013). For that, the Department of Women's Development (JPW) has an actual programme called IRIS i.e Legal Literacy and Women's Rights. The Iris Programme is an initiative that has been enhanced with the aim of improving legal literacy among women. The programme serves as a platform for the dissemination of knowledge and information on individual rights from a legal perspective, as well as on available complaint mechanisms and support services provided to victims of violence, discrimination and injustice. The programme aims to enhance legal literacy among women, increase confidence in reporting incidents, provide information on complaint mechanisms and support services, and provide basic information concerning Islamic and civil marriage and divorce (Department of Women's Development, n.d).

Study by Hasbullah et al. (2023) found that positive experiences of procedural justice were significantly related to compliance behavior and recommended intensifying advocacy on family rights and obligations at all levels. Evidence from a women's legal literacy programme in Kuala Nerus likewise reported improved awareness after community-oriented sessions on civil and Syariah rights, while identifying continuing concerns regarding enforcement and access to legal aid (Mohamad et al., 2025). Together, these studies suggest that legal literacy should connect legal content with trusted facilitators, practical resources and accessible institutional pathways.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative programme-evaluation design supplemented by qualitative comments. More specifically, it used a one-group retrospective pretest-posttest structure. Participants completed one questionnaire

after the programme and rated both their current post-programme position and their retrospective perception of their position before the programme. This classification reflects the structure of the raw response file, in which pre- and post-programme ratings appear within the same response record.

Programme Context and Delivery

The face-to-face programme was entitled ‘Legal Literacy Programme: Know Your Rights As A Woman’ and was held on 23 May 2026 at a mosque of Taman Cheras Jaya, Selangor. The legal-literacy component ran from 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., while registration, closing activities and lunch extended the overall event from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The programme was organized by one of the community research groups from the Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA with the cooperation of the mosque’s Muslim Women’s Bureau and Guidance and Counselling Bureau and Mimbar Permuafakatan Ibubapa Malaysia (MAPIM) Selangor.

The programme was conducted as a Knowledge Transfer Programme (KTP) designed to facilitate knowledge exchange between academic staff and the local community. Targeting women, particularly single mothers, the programme attracted 38 participants from the surrounding community. It commenced with an introductory session on the importance of legal literacy among women, delivered by Associate Professor Datin Dr. Rafeah Saidon, the research grant leader and programme director. This was followed by a forum moderated by Ts. Siti Fatahiyah Mahamood, featuring Puan Husna Hamdan, a Syarie lawyer from Tetuan Amirahusna. The programme concluded with an interactive session comprising discussion, legal consultation, and a question-and-answer session, enabling participants to clarify issues and obtain practical guidance concerning their marital and post-marital legal rights.

Participants and Sampling

The analyzed dataset contained 38 complete responses from women who attended the community programme. All recorded participants completed the same questionnaire, so the analysis used complete-case data without imputation. The sample represented programme attendees who voluntarily completed the evaluation form and should therefore be understood as a convenience or programme-participant sample rather than a probability sample of Malaysian women.

Questionnaire

The Google Forms questionnaire contained demographic items, six programme-evaluation statements, 20 retrospective pre-programme statements, the corresponding 20 post-programme statements and one open-ended comment question. The outcome statements were organized by the source form into four operational domains: knowledge, skills, attitude and aspirations, with five items in each domain. Responses used a five-point scale in which higher scores represented a more favorable assessment.

A domain score was calculated as the mean of its five items for each respondent. The overall outcome score was the mean of all 20 items. Internal consistency was high for the six programme-evaluation items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.93$) and for the retrospective outcome scales. Across the four domains, α ranged from 0.85 to 0.98. These coefficients indicate consistent responses within the instrument, but they do not establish content validity or prove that the domains are fully distinct from one another.

Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the respondents’ demographic characteristics. Programme evaluation items were summarized using means, standard deviations and the percentage of respondents who selected ratings of 4 or 5. As outcome measures were based on five-point Likert-scale responses and involved paired retrospective pre- and post-programme ratings, the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to examine differences between the two measurements. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. The sum of positive ranks, W^+ was reported as the Wilcoxon test statistic. Open-ended comments were analyzed using descriptive themes

analysis, in which recurring responses were grouped into common themes. A single comment could be classified under more than one theme when it contained several relevant issues.

RESULT

Respondent Profile

All 38 respondents were women. Half were older than 60 years, while 42.1% were aged 40–60 years. Only 7.9% were aged 20–40 years, and no respondent was recorded as younger than 20 years. The sample therefore mainly represented middle-aged and older women.

Table 1. Respondent profile (N = 38)

Characteristic	n	%
20–40 years	3	7.9
40–60 years	16	42.1
More than 60 years	19	50.0
Female	38	100.0

Programme Evaluation

Participants evaluated the programme favorably, with a composite mean of 4.47 (SD = 0.50) on the five-point scale. Mean item scores ranged from 4.37 to 4.58. Speaker expertise received the highest mean rating (M = 4.58), followed by facilitator efficiency (M = 4.55). Between 94.7% and 100.0% of respondents selected 4 or 5 for every programme evaluation item.

Table 2. Programme evaluation

Evaluation item	Mean	SD	Rated 4–5 (%)
Suitability of programme objectives	4.42	0.55	97.4
Programme content	4.39	0.59	94.7
Speaker expertise	4.58	0.55	97.4
Facilitator efficiency	4.55	0.50	100.0
Effectiveness of activities	4.37	0.67	94.7
Overall programme assessment	4.53	0.60	94.7
Composite programme score	4.47	0.50	—

Perceived Pre- and Post-Programme Change

All four questionnaire-defined domains showed higher post-programme scores. The largest mean increase occurred in aspirations (change = 2.21), followed by attitude (change = 2.07), skills (change = 1.79) and knowledge (change = 1.77). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated statistically significant paired differences for every domain (all $p < .001$).

The overall 20-item score increased from 2.36 (SD = 1.02) to 4.32 (SD = 0.45), a mean change of 1.96. Thirty-seven respondents recorded a higher overall post-programme score, none recorded an identical score and one recorded a lower score. This pattern demonstrates a strong and broadly shared perception of immediate programme benefit.

Table 3. Retrospective pre- and post-programme domain scores

Domain	Pre-M (SD)	Post M (SD)	Mean change	W+	p
Knowledge	2.42 (1.10)	4.19 (0.55)	1.77	738.0	< .001
Skills	2.27 (1.03)	4.06 (0.75)	1.79	630.0	< .001
Attitude	2.40 (1.15)	4.47 (0.51)	2.07	561.0	< .001
Aspirations	2.36 (1.13)	4.56 (0.46)	2.21	701.0	< .001
Overall outcome	2.36 (1.02)	4.32 (0.45)	1.96	740.0	< .001

Note. Scores range from 1 to 5. W+ denotes the sum of positive ranks in the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

Open-Ended Feedback

Eighteen respondents provided substantive written comments. The dominant theme was programme continuity and wider reach: 15 of the 18 comments explicitly requested continuation, expansion, follow-up sessions or delivery to additional community venues such as mosques. Participants described the programme as beneficial for improving women's understanding and protecting women's rights.

A second theme concerned the need for practical procedural support. One participant requested links to online forms and clearer information about fees involved in bringing a matter to court. Another explained that the topic was too broad for a single session and recommended dividing it into smaller modules. These comments indicate that participants wanted the programme to move beyond general awareness towards detailed, usable guidance. The comments were originally submitted in Malay and are paraphrased here in English.

Table 4. Themes from participant comments

Theme	Indicative evidence	Programme implication
Continuation and expansion	Repeated requests for future sessions, wider outreach and delivery at more community venues.	Develop a recurring community series rather than a one-off event.
Awareness and protection of women's rights	Participants described increased understanding, awareness and confidence to make better decisions.	Retain rights-focused explanations and realistic examples.
Practical procedural guidance	Requests for online forms, filing-cost information and clearer pathways to court or legal assistance.	Provide a resource pack, referral directory and step-by-step claim guidance.
More focused learning modules	A request to divide a broad and complex topic into smaller, deeper sessions.	Separate modules by right, procedure and institution, with follow-up clinics.

DISCUSSION

Programme Acceptability

The high programme-evaluation scores show that participants regarded the objectives, content, speakers, facilitation and activities as appropriate. This level of acceptance is important because community legal education depends on trust, comprehensibility and participants' willingness to engage with sensitive family issues. The strong ratings for speaker expertise and facilitator efficiency suggest that credible facilitators and orderly programme delivery were central strengths.

Perceived Outcomes

Participants reported significant improvement across all questionnaire-defined domains. Knowledge and skills gains indicate that respondents felt better able to understand, apply and communicate what they learned. Attitude and aspiration showed even larger increases, suggesting that the programme may have strengthened interest, positive orientation and intention to continue learning or applying the material.

This pattern is consistent with the broader purpose of legal literacy: converting abstract rights into confidence and readiness to act. It also resembles the positive pre- and post-programme pattern reported in the Kuala Nerus legal literacy evaluation (Mohamad et al., 2025). The present study adds a more explicit quantitative account of programme quality and four perceived outcome domains.

Implications for Community Legal Literacy

The comments provide a clear direction for programme development. Participants did not merely request repetition; they asked for wider access, continuity and practical tools. Future delivery should therefore be structured as a sequence. An introductory session can explain the rights relevant after divorce, a husband's death and polygamy, while later modules can address claim procedures, evidence, forms, expected costs, referral options and enforcement.

Partnerships with legal-aid providers, Syariah institutions, women's agencies and community organizations would allow the programme to combine education with direct referral. Such an approach reflects the logic of legal empowerment, where individual understanding is strengthened by institutional pathways and collective support (Joshi, 2017). Participants should leave with a concise resource pack containing verified contact information, document checklists and links to official services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several areas can be considered to strengthen future iterations of the programme and its evaluation. First, future evaluations should complement participants' self-assessment with objective, scenario-based pre- and post-tests to provide a more direct assessment of actual legal knowledge gain and the ability to apply legal information to practical situations. Second, a longitudinal follow-up conducted approximately three to six months after programme completion could determine the extent to which participants retain the knowledge gained and subsequently utilise legal aid, Syariah Court services or other relevant legal resources. Third, future studies should consider recruiting participants from multiple community venues and locations to increase sample diversity and improve the generalisability of the findings. In response to participants' feedback, the programme could also be redesigned into distinct and modular sessions addressing specific legal issues and practical procedures. These sessions could include step-by-step guidance on court filing procedures, required documentation, applicable fees and other costs, available legal assistance, and relevant channels for seeking redress. Such an approach may strengthen the practical value of community-based legal literacy programmes by enabling participants not only to understand their legal rights but also to identify and navigate the appropriate mechanisms for exercising those rights.

CONCLUSION

The empirical data show that the community-based legal literacy programme was well received and was associated with substantial perceived short-term improvement in knowledge, skills, attitudes and aspirations. Participants' comments strongly supported continuation and expansion, while also calling for more detailed procedural guidance and smaller, focused modules. These results support community delivery as a promising approach to women's legal education, but they do not establish that the programme caused durable legal knowledge or successful rights claims. A stronger future evaluation should combine objective testing, follow-up measurement and verified referral outcomes. With these improvements, community legal literacy can move from awareness raising towards practical and sustained access to justice.

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Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced the research, its findings, or the interpretation of the results.

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