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Labyrinthine Passages: How Women Activists of Malaysia Adapt to Overcome Differential Effects

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Abstract:

Due to structural, political, and cultural reasons, women activists face burdens in their work, especially concerning two particular issues: child marriage and stateless children. This study investigates how these women organize themselves to challenge notions of patriarchy in Malaysia, which have been buttressed by its colonial and postcolonial history and the institutionalization of political Islam through state and non-state actors. By conducting 13 individual, semi-structured interviews with key informants, we researched the experience of hate speech on those informants through a critical realist approach. The results found a marked divergence in the issues focused on by East and West Malaysia activists, with structural reform and injustice as key motivators. Different cultural factors and historical ties were among the factors which caused significant east-west differences in the results collected. Structural discrimination, such as state actions (as informed by right-wing populism) and online harassment, were the challenges faced. Ultimately, it was found that there is a need for a coalition, or a support group, for women activists as they embark on their work.

Keywords: women, activism, Malaysia, Islam, hate speech, critical realism, child marriages, stateless children.

迷宫通道：马来西亚的女性活动家如何适应克服差异化影响

摘要：

由于结构、政治和文化原因，女性活动家在工作中面临负担，尤其是在两个特定问题上：童婚和无国籍儿童。这项研究调查了这些妇女如何组织自己来挑战马来西亚的父权制观念，这些观念受到其殖民和后殖民

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历史以及通过国家和非国家行为者的政治伊斯兰制度化的支持。通过对关键线人进行13次个人、半结构化访谈，我们通过批判现实主义的方法研究了对这些线人的仇恨言论体验。结果发现，东马和西马活动家关注的问题存在明显分歧，主要动机是结构性改革和不公正。不同的文化因素和历史联系是导致收集结果显著的东西方差异的因素之一。结构性歧视，例如国家行为（受右翼民粹主义影响）和在线骚扰，是面临的挑战。最终，人们发现需要一个联盟或一个支持小组，以帮助女性积极分子开展工作。

关键词： 妇女、激进主义、马来西亚、伊斯兰教、仇恨言论、批判现实主义、童婚、无国籍儿童。

1. Introduction

The burdens of women activists in Malaysia have been problematic for several structural, political, and cultural reasons. They are chiefly caused by patterns of domination operating in a patriarchal society, the type present in most gendered regimes (Ng, 2010). As Ng (2010) observes, local scholarly work has taken the center or the state as its focal point of analysis, which is seen as a rigid and factionless organization working as a collective to subjugate and control its subjects using Islam as an ideology. Others have looked at social media and activism by focusing more on respondents in the Klang Valley, where the capital of Kuala Lumpur is located (Tye et al., 2018). This study focuses on women. They must be treated equally in the political space, primarily to improve female activists' work effectiveness to effect real change for women, and, secondly, for Malaysia to uphold its commitment to the United Nations treaty of women's equality, or CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women).

The struggles that Malay-Muslim women activists face are far more complicated than their non-Muslim counterparts since ethnic Malays are also constitutionally defined as Muslims, with Malaysia's dominant Malay political elite belonging to this ethnic grouping. All societies have differing conceptions of how people should behave, and these diverging battles and struggles give all societies a distinct character and structure. Local meanings of sexuality that influence the gendered roles of Malay women are closely associated with tradition (*adat*), Islam, and language (Muhamad et al., 2019). Recently, women's rights, particularly their role as voters, have played a more central role than in the past. For instance, the short-lived Pakatan Harapan (PH) regime introduced a social and income security policy in August 2018, mainly targeted at the lower-income society segment, operationalized by the government, which contributed RM40 (approximately USD10) to their Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) accounts, going into their retirement savings funds.

Women activists have actively advocated on a wide range of issues, including child brides, a local issue of great concern to international organizations. Not long into the start of the PH regime, a 41-year-old man was reported to have married an 11-year-old child, an episode that drew a lot of local and international media attention (Ramli, 2018). If anything, the reporting on the incident was even more dampening than the

incident itself: "Before Hari Raya, my parents asked me about Abe's intention to marry me. I accepted because I love him. I know I am still young and not in school, but I have known Abe for a long time, one of Abe's children is also my friend", as quoted by the bride (Ramli, 2018). The more urban, educated, liberal, and opinionated populace viewed the PH government as impotent. Given its failure to address this issue, it was regarded as incongruous with its reform agenda. This is an important case in point for the "image" of the state, where continuous negotiations between populist leaders in the center and the periphery result in policy outcomes.

Studies that have on women activism in Malaysia have typically been West Malaysia centric. They tend to concentrate on women's participation within religious-based political parties (Azmi, 2020) or the agency-structure-based analysis of Islam and responses from women interested in participating in mainstream politics (Suleman, 2021). Others have queried social media in challenging notions of patriarchy in Malaysia, asserting that the English news portals are more efficient in challenging gender-based narratives of the state (Yousef, 2020).

This study on women's activism in Malaysia attempts to comprehensively understand the sociocultural (i.e., Malay Muslims and their non-Muslim fellow citizens), class (lower-income, the upper and middle class), and spatial (the rural-urban divide and the East Malaysian activists) issues. Migdal (2001, p. 65) argues that "the accommodations between state and others are the real politics of many third-world societies – politics that often take place far from the capital city".

This study attempts to investigate how women organize themselves to challenge notions of patriarchy in Malaysia. Secondly, it attempts to detail the contexts and constraints of authoritarian forces, considering both the problems and prospects for women activists in similar contexts. This study focuses on two salient issues that involve the "image" of the state and its interactions with the periphery. The first is the kind of gendered harassment faced by women activists in Malaysia, including rural and Sabahan and Sarawakian activists. The second is the types of reforms that women activists have pushed for, with particular attention paid to the issue of child marriage and stateless children.

2. The Malaysian Context

Malaysia has gradually transformed itself from an exporter of agricultural products into an industrialized state, with its increasingly authoritarian leadership sustained mostly through legal measures, which has allowed it to maintain the apparatus of a democratic state. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was the largest and most dominant party within the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which ruled from Independence until PH came to power in 2018.

After the 1969 elections and subsequent riots, the former Alliance was transformed into BN under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak, who formed a unity government with former opposition parties, briefly including its rival, the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). In the case of PAS, being a predominantly *Islamist* party: "as such Islam constitutes its sphere of activity and its horizons of possibility are determined by the limits of the discourse that defines it for what it is" (Noor, 2014, p. 14).¹ Despite their occasional partnerships, PAS and BN were mostly political rivals. Under the leadership of Asri Muda, PAS was not as successful in maintaining power in Kelantan, where it lost miserably in the 1978 General Election (GE).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 paved the way for two seemingly contrasting types of discourse for Malaysians: Western-driven *laissez-faire* neoliberal capitalism that benefited a few Malay elites and the radical alternative of following the footsteps of Ayatollah Khomeini. The younger generation of PAS leaders, like Mohamad Sabu, started adopting Khomeini's rhetoric, seen when he condemned the United States (US) as *Syaitan Besar* (Great Satan); meanwhile, there was a growing concern about taking Malay Muslims to the streets, with the rise of students enrolling themselves in religious schools (Noor, 2014, p. 116-117). When Anwar Ibrahim and other Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, ABIM) leaders met with Khomeini in Iran and called for an "Iranian Liberation Solidarity Day," this was considered as part of a growing trend that challenged the legitimacy of the ruling state.

The impact of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamisation process became seemingly official when Mahathir Mohamad was installed as Prime Minister (PM).² Under the first term as a leader (1981-2003), BN

became an increasingly high-profile force in the international community. The process of expansion and increased institutionalization of Islam between during Mahathir's first term as PM and Anwar Ibrahim, who left ABIM and eventually served as his deputy³ had far-reaching consequences. Migdal (2001, p. 76) refers to Anwar's entry into BN as the "co-optation of those who might otherwise develop threatening power centers outside the state organization."

The Islamic Missionary Foundation of Malaysia (Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia, YADIM) operated at the federal level. Managing the symbolic realm was integral for the current government to win Malay Muslims' "hearts and minds." In managing the institutions that oversaw Malay Muslims' socialization, Mahathir's administration also concerned itself with centralizing institutions to produce ideas of Islam, and subsequent policies of rewards and sanctions would formalize this new "image" of the state, which separated it from its ostensibly secular Alliance roots. In 1970, the National Fatwa Committee (Majlis Fatwa Kebangsaan, MFK) was established under the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia (Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia, MKI), which informs about and regulates the general conduct of Muslims in Malaysia.

The concentration of power under the MFK, which operates under the Prime Minister's Department, enables the executive branch of the government to curate masterfully, impose sanctions legally and regulate Muslim agencies in Malaysia lawfully. By default, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM), which serves as secretariat to the MKI, provides the PM with institutional powers (under the PM's Department) to dictate the socialization of Malay Muslims through rewards and sanctions. According to JAKIM's website, it has three main functions: (1) to draft and standardize Sharia laws; (2) to coordinate and develop Islamic education; (3) to standardize Islamic administration in the state (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2020).

The MKI can influence Islam in Malaysia and beyond; for instance, in 2017, the *Journal of Islamic Research (Jurnal Penyelidikan Islam)* published by MKI featured an article that ostensibly opposed terrorism and Daesh,⁴ the so-called "Islamic State" (Siti, 2017), but at the same time argued that Islam was under siege by a Western culture of hedonism (Mohd &

¹A comparative example of PAS's allure for a native society struggling in the postcolonial period can be seen abroad. Noor (2014, p. 116) states that as in Egypt's case in the late 1970s, "for those who failed to succeed in the new free economy, Islam was a remedy to the personal and social ills as it promised at least the notion of a pious society that was equal in the God's eyes, despite the evident inequalities in Cairo's streets."

² Moustafa (2018, p. 41) has more to say on Mahathir's period impact on state Islam, particularly in terms of "Islamic law" codification: "New legislation plethora was issued at the state and federal levels in the 1980s and 1990s, formalizing substantive and

procedural Anglo-Muslim law aspects even more than the second wave of Muslim law enactments from the 1950s and 1960s."

³His role ended when he was sacked in 1998 and jailed in 1999, although he returned to politics as de facto leader of the opposition after his release. Ultimately, Mahathir returned as PM as the leader of PH, which Anwar was a part of.

⁴ According to Winter (2015), Daesh chiefly distributed its propaganda through virtual messaging outlets, broadly spanning six themes: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism.

Engku, 2017). Another article argued that "Western Liberalism" was sponsoring civil society to undermine Islam, based on a conference that was jointly organized by the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Council (Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan, MAIWP) in which a paper titled "Liberalism: The Notorious Illuminati Agenda" (Liberalisme: Agenda Jahat Illuminati) was presented (Muhammad, 2017). These joint academic conferences and journalistic articles have enabled the state to oppose gender roles that are considered "deviant" from state-indoctrinated values, whereby it dismisses women activists as being Western-influenced and un-Islamic. While the 2018 GE provided avenues for reforms, the compounded effects of state dogma have had long-lasting effects on two fronts in particular: women activists and perceptions of child marriage.

In hindsight, the factors that led to the BN government's eventual fall in 2018 include: (1) the intra-elite Malay feuding that led to UMNO's diminished hegemony (Gomez & Osman, 2019), (2) protest votes cast by Malay voters (Rahman, 2019); (3) effective coalition building by the opposition, in which it co-opted civil society and social media (Khuo, 2018); (4) BN's inability to win over younger voters (Welsh, 2019); (5) foreign actors (Malhi, 2018); and (6) swing votes of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Some argue that the PH government's eventual replacement by the Perikatan Nasional (PN) within 22 months was due to the manipulation and consolidation of political power (Moten, 2020). Regardless, one of the most salient elements in maintaining power for the current government is the consolidation of Malay votes and the unification of Malay Members of Parliament (MPs) under a solid Islamic banner to win the coming elections.

3. Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The state's hegemonic projection of Islam and subjugation of Muslim agency is not always coherent and all-encapsulating, and it should be studied in a dialectical relationship within society. As for Max Weber's understanding of the state, he saw this as "a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (1) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, and (2) the actual practices of its multiple parts" (Migdal, 2001, p. 15-16).

The concept of state autonomy is its ability to reframe the power of local, transnational and global concepts into one that fits the state's territory (Migdal & Schlichte, 2005). The state has recourse to build powerful institutions like MKI, IIUM, and YADIM, which serve as proxies "to enforce particular rules of behavior among its population and socialize people as to the appropriateness of the state's role in making rules for daily behavior and the intrinsic rightness of those

rules" (Migdal & Schlichte, 2005, p. 10). A mental image of the state is produced in viewing the non-state actors interacting with state apparatus (including the police, teachers, the institutions mentioned above, media, etc.). As Migdal writes, a two-way relationship then develops, in which both entities are affected:

The state dynamics involve its changing image, its changing practices, the changing relationship between them, and the effects of all these changes on the field of power that is the state. In this process, social groups are transformed, including their goals and, ultimately, the rules they are promoting. Like any other group or organization, the state is constructed and re-constructed, invented and re-invented through its interaction as a whole and interaction of its parts with others (Migdal, 2001, p. 15).

The relationship between state and non-state actors *vis-à-vis* its institutions can be diagrammed as follows:



Figure 1. The hierarchy of state and non-state actors

The survival politics for these intermediary career bureaucrats are based on the following principles:

1) "The appointment of agency leaders based on their loyalty to the ruler or ethnic affiliation cuts into the efficient operations of a bureau and its ability to supervise efficiently";

2) "The frequent shuttling in and out of new agency heads can have a devastating impact on policy implementation" (Migdal, 2001, p. 86). Being beneficiaries of the status quo, clients and non-state local leaders (such as government-sponsored strongmen and local leaders exercising social control of related policies) are typically resistant to change as they will no longer benefit from past or existing policies. Two important elements need to be considered in this discussion of the state in society and its relations to women's activism in Malaysia. These are the relationship between the state and its non-state actors, which must "accommodate one another in a web of political, economic, and social exchanges," whereby "their bargaining determines the final allocation of state resources that have made their way to the region" and the regime's overall stability maintenance through

"accommodation on a much grander scale," which hinges on "the local stability that strongmen can guarantee as long as they provide workable survival strategies to the population" (Migdal, 2001, p. 92).

We contend that those aforementioned non-state actors are typically ruffled by women activists working against patrimonial practices in society, focusing on two particular issues: (1) stateless children and (2) child marriage. The activists use religion, justifying their stance through Islam,⁵ choosing the Scylla and Charybdis of *jus primae noctis*. The PH government may be considered hypocritical in light of its pledge for reform due to the way it handled those two issues. However, we argue that since the government only lasted for 22 months, it did not have sufficient time to reform this web of political, economic, and social exchanges, having also faced resistance from religious non-state local leaders, clients, and implementors. We argue that they were reluctant to changes in policies on issues of child marriages and stateless children based on historical and religious policies, culture, and socioeconomic constraints. Those constraints were supplemented by spatial, class, and cultural issues on the periphery. Women activists pushing for reforms on those fronts were the objects of online hate speech and suffered differential treatment through institutional discrimination.

4. Methods

This qualitative study conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with key informants: 12 women activists and one male activist. Our research interest area was the experience of hate speech on the informants and understanding their meaning. The items listed in the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines were followed (O'Brien et al., 2014).

4.1. Approach

The researcher adopted the critical realist approach because the "search for causation helps researchers explain social events and suggest practical policy recommendations to address social problems" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 181). Critical analysis has "the ability to engage in explanation, and causal analysis (rather than engaging in the detailed empirical description of a given context) makes CR (critical realism) useful for analyzing social problems and suggesting social change solutions" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 186). The two major commitments that the researcher placed importance on and which indicate critical realism were:

1) "A commitment to mind–world dualism, which critical realism shares with neopositivism";

2) "A rejection of phenomenalism in favor of *transfactualism*" (emphasis in the original), which Jackson defines as "the notion that valid knowledge claims reach beyond experiences to grasp the deeper generative causal properties giving rise to those experiences" (Jackson, 2016, p. 74).

To explain the unobservable, we handled it in three distinct ways. Firstly, we treated the objects being observed instrumentally "as not truly referring to anything but instead as playing important roles in enabling theories to cohere and to generate sensible explanations and predictions" (Jackson, 2016, p. 79). Secondly, we paid attention to the *provisional* placeholders, "in terms of yet-to-be-discovered hidden variables or unities beyond our present perceptual grasp provide the clearest example" (Jackson, 2016, p. 79). Thirdly, "going beyond the establishment of deductive connections, in turn, was essential even to simple operations such as determining whether some object was a magnet" (Jackson, 2016, p. 80).

The critical realist epistemology that we used to explain social events "and the effects they can have throughout the three-layered 'iceberg' of reality" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 186). Fletcher's metaphor allows us to understand discrimination and hate speech targeting women activists by viewing the data through three lenses:

1. Empirical level: experienced and observed events; events understood through human interpretation.

2. Actual level: events occurred, whether observed or not.

3. Real level: causal mechanisms within objects or structures cause events at the empirical level (Fletcher, 2017, p. 190).

The critical realism approach is ideal for this study type. Firstly, we were constantly reflecting on whether the discrimination faced by women activists was reactionary in terms of the state's political, social, and cultural factors, which was then encouraged by its institutions and the social actors involved. Secondly, *transfactualism* allowed us to constantly reflect on the data to grasp the deeper generative causal properties that enabled those experiences. It was then reflected in the empirical, actual and real levels of discrimination faced.

4.2. Setting and Sampling

It is important that we "focus not only on identifying and describing all aspects of the methods (e.g., approach, researcher characteristics and role, sampling strategy, context, data collection, and analysis)," but also on "justifying each choice" (O'Brien et al., 2014, p. 2). A sociodemographic breakdown of the informants, including the sole male one, is shown in the table below.

⁵ This study does not attempt to understand and interpret the theological underpinnings of religion. We assume the epistemological understanding that all religions mean well until people are exploited for mobilization purposes in the name of those religions, including Islam.

Table 1: Sociodemographic information of the informants (n=13)

Informant	Ethnic and religious background	Occupation	Gender	Location
1	Malay	Lawyer/activist	Woman	Peninsula Malaysia
2	Chinese convert to Islam	Member of Parliament (MP)	Woman	Peninsula Malaysia
3	Indian	Local non-governmental organisation (NGO)	Woman	Peninsula Malaysia
4	Malay	International NGO	Woman	Peninsula Malaysia
5	Indigenous	Local NGO	Woman	East Malaysian
6	Indigenous	Local NGO	Woman	East Malaysian
7	Indian	Local NGO	Woman	Peninsula Malaysia
8	Indigenous	Local NGO	Woman	East Malaysian
9	Indigenous	Local NGO	Woman	East Malaysian
10	Indian	Local NGO	Woman	West Malaysian
11	Indian	Local NGO	Man	West Malaysian
12	Malay/Chinese	Local NGO	Woman	West Malaysian
13	Malay	MP	Woman	West Malaysian

For this study's purposes, we understand the "state" as part of society because society has various ways of organizing itself, whereby the state is one mechanism of doing so. Here, the state, through its various mechanisms, is the "ultimate agency setting and arbitrating the rules and regulations that frame what other institutions, groups, etc. do in society, including how they interact with the state" (Kerkvliet, 2018, p. 159). As Kerkvliet further defines it:

"State," as used here, is a summary term for people in a country, including their institutions and customs, who share political and economic circumstances and environment. "State" refers to officials and institutions that make, implement, and enforce rules intended to apply across the entire society and its various parts (Kerkvliet, 2018, p. 158).

We also consider that there are individuals within society who can organize themselves as groups, communities, and organizations, which allows them to resist the state. Similarly, there will be opposing counterparts that seek "protection, support, and intervention from the state." We must also be clear that the term "civil society" is distinct from "society," whereby it "refers to separate individuals and groups speaking, writing, teaching, acting, and organizing around various interests and issues in public places independent of the state" (Kerkvliet, 2018, p. 159).

The civil society maintains a certain amount of civility and willingness to interact and cooperate with the state. It takes efforts to contend with the ideas of the state and its claims. However, it also requires a state that tolerates differences, which intends to maintain the corresponding institutions, laws, and practices that deal with civil society. Among the organized members of society are the various NGOs which women activists form to resist the dominant ideas of the state.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Divergence in Issues

5.1.1. West Malaysia

According to a respected senior woman activist in Malaysia, women in the 1970s and 1980s were drawn to activism by coincidence, compared to the conscious decisions made by women in recent times. Compounded structural and cultural restrictions based on how a woman is socialized in society were mentioned.

So even as a student, I was helping with a group collaborating with former plantation workers and tin-mine workers in Puchong and other areas surrounding it. Moreover, we were working on a cooperative program. This cooperative still exists today. That is when I met women workers, and I realized that the women workers were very restricted because of their culture, family tradition, and so on. So, they could not attend meetings or become active in the committee.⁶

Comparatively, a young women activist for UNDI 18 spoke with pride when she said that: "In 2019, there was a unanimous support in both houses in Malaysia to lower the voting age, and for our country, we started campaigning for this in 2016 when I was still a student with my co-founder and partner anonymous". Women activists of West Malaysia tend to concentrate on civil rights themes, including gender-based discrimination, particularly that which affects the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community, and rights of the refugee communities, particularly the Rohingya. Regarding refugees and women activists of the Peninsula, at least one respondent was motivated by factors affecting "the well-being of human rights, education, basically the well-being of the Rohingyas in Malaysia. As they are stateless people, nobody has their records, so they are easily abused". Others are motivated to "create avenues for them to be able to speak up and also showcase their talent." The informant went on to say that:

I use that as a bridge to connect them with the Malaysian community. Moreover, I look at policy intervention regarding refugee rights to work, education, and healthcare lobbying with ministers and members of parliament. I would not say to come up with a better policy because we do not have one, but at least come up with a refugee policy.

A female journalist said that she sees her reporting as activism and that her work "covers many economics, migration issues, refugee rights, women's rights particularly related to domestic violence, sexual assault, and court case representations."⁷

⁶ The transcripts of all interviews have been lightly edited for clarity.

⁷ The differential treatment and physical attacks faced by refugees and marginalized communities, particularly foreign workers and the Rohingya, are increasingly visible. Recently, a foreign worker was manhandled by a Malaysian on a shared ride back to their respective homes. The story of a Pakistani who held a UNHCR card, whom a group of criminals brutally castrated, was even more frightening

5.1.2. East Malaysia

Women activists from Borneo are mostly concerned with non-citizen children in Sabah. The state of Sabah can be seen as a vestige of the “fluid archipelago” that recently attracted international attention after an incursion by non-state actors under the Sultan of Sulu, a claimant to the territory (Noor, 2013). The invasion compounded the differential effects on migrant children, who are continuously harassed by the Sabahan immigration officers, police, and the People's Volunteer Corps (RELA, Jabatan Sukarelawan Malaysia), lasting effects on peace and stability in the region. According to Noor (2013), Sabahans have historically been welcoming people from Mindanao, who fled the confrontations between secessionist groups and the Philippine government; the Muslim Bugis and Protestant "Tator" (from Tana Toraja specifically) people from Sulawesi; and Catholic migrants from the east Flores region's small islands, collectively known as "Timor" (Allerton, 2018, p. 1085). Women activists in Sabah, viewing prejudice by state institutions, have formed various NGOs as a result. An activist from Sabah said: "I founded an organization called Anak. So, we work with non-citizen children, and we have a very big population of non-citizens in Sabah, one-third of the population." One activist claimed that: “compared to 10 years ago, many more organizations have come up to work with these communities, especially from the student movement.”

5.2. Motivational Factors

The need for structural reform seemed very relevant to some informants. One activist said that she took the plunge because she felt that she had to correct a broken structure that had used and abused Islam. Before her involvement with human rights committees and working with issues on the Orang Asli, she already saw "something wrong with Malaysia, especially regarding religion movement, especially Islam. I have always felt that there is something bad about the way Malaysia is going, these feelings of right and wrong have always been in me."

Injustice seems to be a recurring theme among women activists. One women activist clearly states: “what started me on activism, injustice? Mostly injustice is of a voice not being heard, of always been ‘dan lain-lain’.”⁸ Some women were motivated because of domestic violence within families. A Sabahan women activist was motivated by speaking about

positive masculinity, such as “healthy masculinity, about getting fathers to be more involved with their kids.” She further elaborates that in the context of Sabah:

There is a really large number of single moms in Sabah, where there are a lot of them that are raising the kids by themselves. Many fathers do not care about the kids anymore after divorce; it is like they are not their responsibility; it is just like "oh." I think it is a really big issue here in Sabah.

5.3. Structural Discrimination

5.3.1. Right-Wing Populism and Muslim Women Activists

Women activists in Malaysia are discriminated against, smeared as supporters of “Western ideas” and a “Jewish agenda” meant to topple the government. A prominent women activist from Bersih, who turned politician after the 2018 elections, claimed that:

Yeah, it only defines seditious intervention or something like that. Moreover, it is very unclear what constitutes hate and what constitutes sedition. So for us, if you want to date back to when we first started Bersih, then, of course, there was the branding of us as mainly anti-Islam, supporters of Jews, LGBT supporters, as though that is a bad thing, and that we are there to topple the government. That was one of the reasons I was arrested under SOSMA [Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012], it was attached to the penal code. It says you are undermining parliamentary democracy.

Dr. Mahathir, the face of the reform movement and leader of the PH government, "tweeted" similar ideas about women, the West, and LGBTQ issues after the knife stabbings in Nice in late 2020. The Nice attack was the second to take place in two weeks in France, and it happened on the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday. One had stated that "irrespective of the religion professed, angry people kill. The French have killed millions of people in the course of their history. Many were Muslims" (Mahathir, 2020). His tweets were quickly and promptly removed from Twitter for having violated their hate speech regulations. In addition to that, he also posted tweets concerning women. "Freedom for women meant the right to vote in elections. Today, we want to eliminate everything different between men and women. Physically, we are different. This limits our capacity to be equal. We have to accept these differences and the limitations that are placed on us. Our value systems are also a part of human rights".

Mahathir's ideas draw from the cultural and historical context of the Malaysian state, which has enabled it to become a gender-based regime. The Rajas (Hindu ruler), Sultans (Arabic rulers), and Yang di-Pertuan Agong (lit. "He Who Is Made Lord," the rotational position of Malaysia's Paramount Ruler) were

(Yasmin, 2021). Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani, a Rohingya Muslim refugee and president of the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia (MERHROM), has been the victim of hate speech and death threats.

⁸ Lit. "others." In colonial Malaya (before the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak into what became the Federation of Malaysia), census forms were introduced by the British. Individuals were officially assigned to four "races": Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others.

and are institutions of power, where women are subservient in a patriarchal structure. We later see the British imperialist administrators claiming to protect the customs and culture of the Tanah Melayu (lit. "Malay Land") by creating the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) in 1905, which was regarded colloquially as a Malayan Eton College. This was the first and only English primary and secondary school that was not a missionary school, meant specifically to enable Malays (only male and mainly elites) to be equipped with English writing and speaking skills, after which they would be absorbed into the Malayan Civil Service (MCS), starting in 1909 (Abdullah et al., 2003). The result was that imperial rule created a system dominated by men, who would eventually hold key legal, economic, and political positions in the country.

With expanding economic class and social mobility, women in Malaysia of all ethnic groups empowered themselves through education and entrepreneurship and have now started to contest the state's decisions. Some women in Malaysia chose the difficult path of activism, inevitably exposing themselves to hate speech and possible hate crimes.

5.3.2. Doxing, Harassments, and Online Hate

A women activist claimed that she was subjected to hate because she was particularly vocal about the Rohingya refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I strongly believe [that is the case] because many insults I received through my WhatsApp, handphone, Facebook, and all that called me a traitor. So, I believe that this is because I am a Malay, speaking for the Rohingyas, the foreigners, and they cannot benefit from it.

While most of the hate was online, she said that she was once was physically threatened. Most importantly, she highlights that she was "doxed" by a Facebook page that belonged to a political party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), founded by Mahathir and currently headed by Muhyiddin Yassin, the current PM.

In May, June, somewhere around then, I received a lot of online threats. One time, because they doxed all my personal information, such as my IC [identification card], phone number, house address, car number, VPN information, much of it was disseminated online. Once or twice, I was followed until I drove into the police station, so I was worried because of that. I do not know, but the first stage, when people started talking about me and spreading the wrong information, was from a PPBM Facebook page. So yeah, that is the very first statement from that Facebook page, that I am a traitor, you know [Stammers]. I got much money bringing these Rohingyas in, yeah, and the thing spread; a few PPBM members somehow got my IC and phone number, and they spread it online until I reported it to the MCMC [Malaysian Communications and Multimedia

Commission] and until I reported that I made a police report. Then, it mellowed down.⁹

Online forms of hate followed similar narratives in East Malaysia for at least one informant.

I was attacked for being anti-Islam. I do not know where that came from, and I only learnt it by accident when I was on Facebook just "googling" my name. After that, I saw that it was listed as the 10 most anti-Islamic individuals.

A key finding of this study was that women in East Malaysia expressed comparatively fewer incidences of being doxed and harassed. For one informant, this key difference is because culturally, women there, unlike those of West Malaysia, are held in higher respect. She explained this difference as follows:

The heads of the houses are the men, right. However, it is a very maternalistic community where if you are sick, you look at the traditional side. The Bobohizan [equivalent to a high priestess] are women, so they pray to the spirits. Who are other people working in the field? The majority are the women. So, women are the reference point.

5.4. Child Marriage

The global elimination of child marriages is Goal Five of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. After the 2018 GE, some women activists and members of the former opposition parties were elected representatives of the state, where the handling of child marriages became a major point of criticism, particularly the marriage between a 41-year-old man and an 11-year-old child bride, as described earlier in the Introduction. Various legal, structural, and cultural issues came into play. The Welfare Department (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM)) reported that between 2007 and 2017, there were 10,000 marriages involving Muslims and 4,999 involving non-Muslims, with the highest numbers recorded in East Malaysia (The Star, 2018). The separate states within Malaysia have individual rights to set the minimum age for marriage and handle religious matters. Seven out of the thirteen states agreed to change the mandatory laws (Alifah, 2019). There was pressure on the government to expel former deputy PM and minister of women, family, and community development, Dr. Wan Azizah (the wife of Anwar Ibrahim), and her deputy minister, Hannah Yeoh. One MP (Informant 2) claimed that "actually what Azalina [an MP from the then opposition-BN, and now a part of PN] pointed out, and very correctly, is that by law, [for one aged] 16 and below, [sexual intercourse in marriage] is already statutory rape. So, how can you justify child marriage and say that it goes according to religion, so which one

⁹ The transcript of the interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

comes first: constitution or law?" In agreement with the MP, another activist claimed that:

Hannah Yeoh comes from a very West Malaysia-centric idea. It does not reflect what is happening in Sabah. There is much cultural heritage that affects child marriage. We saw Jenny Lasimbang, our state minister, really working on it. She understands the different laws we have here; we have three different laws regarding marriage, which was the biggest hurdle for Sabah.

A Sarawakian activist (Informant 9) claimed that the West Malaysia-centric view of child brides was a clear misjudgment by the newly minted PH government.

I would agree with that, yes, because due to events in Sarawak, you also have to consider that the local government in Sarawak also consists of the ketua kampung [village chief]. When it comes to child marriage, when you get the approval, it is not meant to be easy because the approval has to be done by the chief minister himself because they also have to consult the Imam [Muslim priest]. The Malaysian Sharia court is more systematic.

While most of the activists agree that 22 months as government is not sufficient time to make conclusive judgments, it was generally agreed upon that the minister and deputy minister could have had more engagement with stakeholders before releasing statements. For Informant 12, the PH cabinet could not fulfill many of its promises, failing to institute the reform: in particular, the child marriage, sexual harassment bills.

It is not enough to consult NGOs; you have to consult religious leaders, school administrators, and parents. I think these are the stakeholder engagements that the government should have had, and I think one available issue also was the civil service.

The informant continued on the importance of a larger strategic plan to address these issues:

Furthermore, under Datuk Wan Azizah, I will say this was a national strategic plan, as you mentioned, to address the causes of underage marriages. So, we have 58 programs, including 61 government agencies, that run smoothly. So, I believe that a blueprint or a strategic plan is important. Why? Because there is so much emphasis on what the women's ministry should be doing. When you do not "frontline" these issues, and I talk about front-lining, you know the dangers of child marriages, it means all the other relevant ministries must do their part. For example, the Ministry of Home Affairs, what are they doing to prioritize certain legislations?

5.5. Looking Beyond Looks

Women activists in West Malaysia are very aware of the effects of perceptions. One informant opined: "Prime Minister, Mr. Najib Razak, talks about, you know, how he has swindled money, how he has been abusing his powers, but when we go after his wife, Mrs.

Rosmah, we talk about her hair, it is always about the hair and what she is wearing, like why did she do that." Similarly, Dr. Wan Azizah was seen as just Anwar's wife, and as one activist claimed, "people would just say she is there because she is Anwar's wife, but I think that is unfair." Meanwhile, a woman MP talks about the issue of wearing a headscarf:

So, when I decided to wear my scarf, I was 18, I felt like it was my decision, and I remember my father saying that he did not impose. He was trying to talk me out of it because he said, "you know it is not something simple; it is like a commitment, right?"

She further iterates that: "In Malaysia, you have to be extremely careful, and it has made me, perhaps, far more guarded in my interactions," at least in terms of expressing her thoughts. The private domains of women also receive greater scrutiny compared to men. She further expresses her disdain for the continuous media coverage of her separation from her partner:

My divorce was far more covered in all media than that of male politicians. Moreover, I remember that I could not go anywhere without the media coming to court proceedings; they wrote about that repeatedly, and I mean, everyone gets divorced. I mean, this [divorce] happens, you try your best, and my male colleagues would be exempted from the same treatment. People even say, "eh, kudos man, I heard you are dating this girl, that girl".

6. Conclusion

We found that in Malaysia, the state uses multiple intimidation mechanisms through its official and unofficial stakeholders to maintain its patriarchal 'image.' The interviewed women from West Malaysia exhibited higher instances of being harassed by state and non-state actors (unofficially working for the state). West Malaysian women activists also face online discrimination, including Facebook sites that belong to political parties. These women also tend to be vulnerable to populist narratives of politicians (Fernandez, 2020). East Malaysian women activists, on the other hand, report lesser tendencies of being intimidated by non-state actors. Engaging these women activists of East Malaysia offers Malaysia opportunities to counter terrorism in East Malaysia (Fernandez & Lopez, 2020).

This study findings also point to the differing contexts that women activists concentrate on in the West from the East. While the women activists of West and East Malaysia share a common interest in electoral reforms and domestic abuse, they also differ on other mainstream societal issues. Women activists of the West seem more concerned with protecting foreign workers and refugees, particularly the Rohingyas. Regarding children, while the women activists of the West are concerned about child brides with Islam, East Malaysian women activists are more concerned about protecting stateless children. This study also points to

the formation of a formal coalition among women activists in Malaysia.

As the face of the 2018 reforms and “father of development,” Dr. Mahathir made misogynistic statements that placed vociferous independent women in a bad light during his spate of twelve Twitter messages following the beheading of the French teacher in Nice, which were eventually removed. Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, Mahathir’s statements chastising women can be perceived as espousing conservative views that criticized the adoption of Western ideals in a Malaysian context.

Women activists must be protected as they embark upon their labyrinthine passages. A major theme from the findings is that solidarity is important, as evidenced by how various respondents addressed it. This study finds an urgent need for activists to form an informal or formal coalition to counter the problem of being doxed and attacked by mercenary micro-bloggers, for instance. Institutionalising these platforms would help women activists consolidate their work and act cohesively and consistently in their dealings with state and non-state actors. The findings suggest that women activists with higher social capital have a higher ability to circumvent structural impediments.

Sisters in Islam [a local NGO] was with me the last time. A lot of NGOs were standing in solidarity with me at that time; so, they came together, came out with a statement in solidarity with me, and urged the government to do something about doxing all the personal information.

Similarly, women journalists who covered stories affecting refugees are not part of any formal networks that protect them from receiving hate speech and personal attacks. One informant, after relaying her experiences of harassment, remarked about not knowing if there was a way for fellow women journalists to support each other in the wake of such actions.

Many violent remarks I received are very gendered, you know. It is more like, "oh, have you been sleeping with migrants? That is why you are so pro migrants". It is neither here nor there. The frequency with which you receive these things makes it difficult.

In the case of Sabah, the women activists are part of informal WhatsApp groups.

We were trying to empower more women to be part of politics. So there is a WhatsApp group for them. They are trying to organize more activities for women activists. However, other than that, it is just informal WhatsApp group stuff. When you are an activist, your group of friends is usually [part of the] activist circle as well. So, it is an informal support network.

Such coalitions will also benefit women activists in order for them to collectively and effectively address issues such as child marriages because it involves national law, and different stakeholders have chimed in,

stating that it would benefit activists. Protection through mutual support is thus an important finding.

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