THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of Islam in the Malaysian Home

Serina Rahman

TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of Islam in the Malaysian Home

Serina Rahman

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The **Trends in Southeast Asia** series acts as a platform for serious analyses by selected authors who are experts in their fields. It is aimed at encouraging policymakers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.

THE EDITORS

Series Chairman:
    Choi Shing Kwok

Series Editor:
    Ooi Kee Beng

Editorial Committee:
    Su-Ann Oh
    Daljit Singh
    Francis E. Hutchinson
    Benjamin Loh

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle: Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of Islam in the Malaysian Home

By Serina Rahman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As an increasingly conservative wave of Islam engulfs the globe, literalist Salafi interpretations of the faith have become prevalent in Malaysia. While there are several Islamic schools of thought in the country, including those deemed "deviant", the loudest voices are always the more extreme.
- Over the past year, there has been increasing recognition of women's roles as recruiters, financiers and influencers for radical Islamic groups. More women have been arrested for their support for and involvement in the Islamic State (IS), but much of the focus has been on their desire to marry a jihadi soldier or channel funds to the cause. In Malaysia, these women (including returnees from IS) are seen to be followers, not decision-makers or active agents in extremist action.
- While Malay-Muslim women were both economically and socially active prior to colonization, patriarchal norms are now commonplace because of Islamic and Western conventions, as well as increasing conservatism in society.
- Women do have agency in the home, however, and exercise this power and centrality within the private sphere by wielding religion as a tool to exert influence over their spouse and children.
- More attention needs to be paid to mothers as potential nurturers of extremist interpretations of Islam. Their actions in active support of non-violent extremism and intolerant exclusivity could have far-reaching effects given their unrivalled influence in the home. Their need to achieve social recognition through religion, coupled with

increasing Salafi infiltration into mainstream Malaysian society and Islam, could be highly detrimental in multi-faith Malaysia. At the very least, these women may not report family members who intend to participate in terror; at the worst, they may encourage it and sanction jihadi theology and action.

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle: Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of Islam in the Malaysian Home

By Serina Rahman[1]

INTRODUCTION

This study was born of a decade's participant observation of rural women in the southwest of Peninsular Malaysia. It was apparent to me that they dealt with a particularly patriarchal society by establishing power in the privacy of the home by wielding religion as the tool of choice to exert control over their offspring and spouse. Subsequent research into the possibility of rural mothers and mother-figures perpetuating more conservative or exclusivist interpretations of Islam in the home took a different turn, however, when I realized that this state of affairs already exists in urban Kuala Lumpur and its outskirts.

After more than three years letting this stew on a back-burner and after several failed attempts to put forward the hypothesis that mothers could possibly be vectors of terror, it became clear that it is highly taboo in Southeast Asia to posit that a mother-figure could be anything but pure and perfect. However in 2017, the first woman with links to the

Islamic State (IS) was arrested in Singapore; subsequent media coverage of similar arrests in Malaysia and Indonesia enabled the acceptance for publication of an article[2] which had previously been deemed "rather difficult content". In May 2018, the Surabaya family suicide bombings shocked the region and the rejection of this theory for being "offensive to mothers" dissipated.

The question at hand is whether mothers use religion in the private sphere of the home to expand personal power and social standing, and whether that could lead to increased normalization of "hateful extremism".

Initially meant to focus on just rural women, interviews with informants broadened the quest to Kuala Lumpur and its wealthy suburbs. The perpetuation of exclusivist and intolerant views amongst mothers and encouragement to engage in the defence of the greater Islamic cause, or at least to carry out "financial jihad" (*jihad bil mal*), was already in motion. From the city's tertiary centres of learning, a new "empowering form of Islam" not unlike that described as "female jihadism" (EUROPOL 2019) is sent back to rural villages through students and fresh graduates with a mission to recruit disenfranchised "sisters" to the cause.

This paper will begin by defining a spectrum of terms related to radicalization, exclusivity and extremism, then set the scene with an introduction to Malaysian society and its patriarchy and recent leanings towards a more intolerant and literal Islam. It will then examine the multiple roles of Malay-Muslim women in this increasingly conservative society. A discussion of the private and public spheres and how women are seen as perfect pillars of Islam in the home follows. Findings from the field are then examined before I conclude with some possible ways forward.

While this publication attempts to answer the question of whether a woman can use religion to enhance her position and power in the home

---

[2] S. Rahman, "To Fight Radicalisation in Southeast Asia, Empower the Women", *The Conversation*, 6 July 2017, https://theconversation.com/to-fight-radicalisation-in-southeast-asia-empower-the-women-79387 (accessed 7 July 2017).

and among her peers, the overarching goal is to join the dots between seemingly disparate components and highlight the need to look beyond the myth of a mother's purity and perfection in efforts to counter increasingly exclusivist views that feather the nest of hateful extremism. There is a need to highlight these often overlooked breeding grounds of intolerance as they stand to severely jeopardize proclamations of Islamic moderation in multi-faith Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This work is based on more than a decade of participant observation in rural southwest Johor, Malaysia. In-depth research on this subject began with an extensive literature review of existing publications on gender in Islam, Malaysia and Islamic extremism, as well as in the fields of counterterrorism, political Islam and IS (formerly ISIS, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq).[3] Informant interviews were held with gender and women's rights experts, as well as with researchers in counterterrorism and Islamic radicalization in Malaysia. This led to other contacts in the field with religious study circle participants.[4]

To better understand religious study sessions, I attended both Salafi-leaning seminars and more progressive sessions. There are many varieties of Islamic practices in Malaysia; from the traditionalist Sufi school of thought (Norshahril 2017) to the puritanical Salafi interpretations (Mohamed Nawab 2016). There are also underground groups that practise versions of Islam that have been branded "deviant", such as Darul Arqam (Kasztelan 2015) and Shiism.

---

[3] While IS is considered an outlier in Islam and for many, not even deemed Islamic in any way, the organization bears some study for the attraction it is known to have amongst disenchanted Muslims—if not to physically migrate to its territories or enact terror, then to perpetuate its teachings and encourage others to act.

[4] These women attended study circles in Bangi, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam in Selangor, Malaysia. These areas are considered the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city.

For the purpose of this work, study sessions were not selected for the specificities of their school of thought but for what was seen as either more "progressive or liberal" or more "conservative or literal".[5] The assessment of where the sessions fell on this spectrum was made based on who hosted the sessions and/or who was speaking. It is not the purpose of this paper to illustrate theological differences between the Islamic schools of thought in particular.

Other popular preachers recommended by informants were followed online on YouTube or on Facebook. Participation in a conference on Women Rising against Extremism also provided information and contacts.[6] This is a qualitative, partially ethnographic analysis of women (specifically mothers) and their approach to religious education, dissemination and self-empowerment. The names of informants, interviewees and study circle participants have been changed or omitted.

DEFINING THE TERMS

Radicalization is most often seen as a transformative process or movement in the direction of supporting or enacting radical behaviour, or towards extremism (Borum 2011; Neumann 2013; Kruglanski et al. 2014). Extremism refers to political or other ideologies that "oppose a society's core values and principles" (Borum 2011, p. 10). The idea of what is "radical" thus hinges upon what society deems is "mainstream"; a society in which conservative interpretations of a faith is seen as the norm may not construe an act of violence in defence of their faith as radical. It is possible to have "extremist mindsets" or "extremist belief

---

[5] The events by Sisters in Islam are thus seen as more "progressive or liberal" (the latter being the description given to them by the Selangor Religious Authority—and thus "justifying" a fatwa against them), and the sessions by the organizers of the seminar by Farhat Naik as "conservative or literal".

[6] The conference "Women Rising Against Extremism" was organized by Sisters in Islam in Kuala Lumpur from 14 to 18 October 2019.

systems", but these simply indicate that these concepts are "extreme" in contrast to the rest of the society that the actors reside in. An oft quoted phrase is "one man's radical (or terrorist) is another man's freedom fighter" (Ganor 2002).

Context thus cannot be separated from a study of radicalization, which essentially refers to the analysis of how an actor or actors internalize a set of beliefs. Radicalization is inherently political; militant Muslim leaders of extremist groups clearly distort and misuse faith for political means. But this does not necessarily mean that all followers of their charismatic calls to join them will enact physical harm or murder just because they empathise with the cause. Hateful extremism is defined as "behaviours that can incite or amplify hate, or engage in persistent hatred, or equivocate about and make the moral case for violence" (CCE 2019, p. 7). While this too does not guarantee the taking of violent action, its propaganda "turns a blind eye to hate speech, open expressions of racism and politically motivated intimidation" (Neumann 2013, p. 890), as well as "erode psychological barriers to violence" (Borum 2011, p. 29). This does not bode well for a diverse society like Malaysia. Terrorism is one possible end-point of radicalization in which violent action is taken to realize political aims.

There are many degrees of radicalization. McCauley and Moscalenko (2011) illustrate this in a pyramid model of participation in terrorism where a wide base of those who empathize with the cause do not take the final step towards violent action; it is only a select few at the pyramid's apex who act. However, it is a widely flawed assumption that cognitive radicalization leads to terrorism. Many studies have shown that terrorists or violent extremists that act to inflict pain or death on others do not necessarily believe in any particular ideology; religious, political or otherwise. On the other hand, many with radical or extreme views do not themselves incur physical harm on another.

Social movement theory demonstrates how radical transformations do not occur in a vacuum; it is connected to countercultures and larger collective movements (Neumann 2013). The radicalization of Islam, for example, is said to take place when the Muslim community feels threatened by those who are not of the same faith (Liow and Arosaie 2019). In the case of Malaysia, increasingly conservative interpretations

of Islam have arisen in tandem with political Islam, in which ruling governments have used religion as a tool to retain or regain power (Rahman 2018).

Of the many Islamic schools of thought, it is often assumed that Salafists (or Salafi-Wahabis) are inherently violent and radical. Kamarulnizam and Mohd Afandi (2015) clarify that Salafi faith simply emphasizes the fundamental teachings of Islam. *Jihad*, a term often misunderstood as a battle between Muslims and non-Muslims, is defined as a "struggle"; this too is a term that has no single interpretation. While for some it is a non-negotiable physical act against anyone (Muslim or non-Muslim) to uphold the sanctity of Islam, for others it is a personal, internal battle to stay on the right path.

Salafism is often misconstrued as the violent "jihadi" interpretation of Islam but this is not necessarily true. Mohamed Nawab (2017, p. 14) describes Malaysia's "neo-Salafis" who reject Sufis and Shiites as deviants, and emphasize the importance of a distinct identity from non-Muslims, yet have refashioned themselves into an "appealing face of Salafism". This is done through English-language seminars pitched at the better-educated, English-speaking populace focusing on topics such as parenting, spirituality and marriage. Neumann (2013) also describes "quietist Salafists" who reject violence but encourage separation from mainstream (non-Muslim) society.

What is important to note, however, is that radicalization happens over a period of time, as an accumulation of myriad reasons, discontent and influences. While this paper inevitably explores Salafi-leaning interpretations of Malaysian Islam, the focus is more on its exclusivist attitudes towards others who do not follow the same line of thought, and the possibility of radicalization amongst the women who participate in related study circles and seminars. The discussion in the following sections highlights the social bonds between women in Malaysia, an aspect of Salafi jihad that has been said to be more important than its ideology (Kruglanski et al., 2014), and the potential for this approach to Islam to normalize extreme interpretations and hateful extremism, thereafter potentially jeopardizing Malaysia's harmonious multi-ethnic and multi-faith social fabric.

PATRIARCHY, PUBLIC/PRIVATE SPHERES AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

Patriarchy is a social construct based on biological differences between male and female, through which gendered assumptions and expectations define spaces and human behaviour (Rajan 2011, p. 18). The public and private sphere dichotomy refers to domains within which an individual is able to exercise influence, dominance and authority (Ridzi 2009).

Before the arrival of the European colonizers, Malay women were seen to be economically and socially active in the public sphere, and matriarchy or matrilineal communities which accorded women at least equal (if not superior) status were not uncommon (Karim 1987; Hirschmann 2016). Malay *adat* (custom) is known for some level of patriarchy wherein the private, domestic sphere of the home is usually delineated for the "docile and peaceful" female who is deemed more suited to the roles of housekeeping, child-bearing and nurturing, while men (and masculinity) are assumed to be better suited to the public spheres of work, authority and decision-making (Raja Rohana 1991, p. 16). However in the early days, *adat* also accorded women the right to demand divorce, equal inheritance and economic independence (Karim 1987). The advent of Islam and colonial societal norms triggered a substantial change in perceptions towards women's role in society.

The Islamic resurgence that came with the rise of political Islam emphasized women's reproductive roles and connection (if not confinement) to the home. This entrenched gendered identities based on Muslim "ideals" and further ensconced mothers as homemakers and Islamic educators to counter their upward mobility and declining male authority in the home (Ong 1995). Financial maintenance was contingent upon a wife's obedience to her husband; a form of economic guardianship (McLarney 2011). In a 2019 survey of 675 women across Malaysia,[7] it was found that they believed that they were duty-bound to obedience and

---

[7] This study by Sisters in Islam was published on 15 October 2019, and provides the local context to Islamic women's views of their rights and obligations.

conformance in order to be a "good wife". In a marriage relationship, 97 per cent agreed that they must obey their husbands and take care of their children. The principle of *nusyuz* (disobedience)[8] was cited as the reason why they need to obey their spouse.[9]

Raja Rohana (1991) notes that contrary to subjugation, Islam improved the conditions of women during a time when "pre-Islam pagan Arab men regarded women as possessions to be bought, sold or inherited". Sisters in Islam (SIS), also highlight other verses in the Quran that emphasize marital equality, love, compassion and justice. However, *adat* and political Islam has led to laws that disadvantage Malay-Muslim women.

Agency is an individual's socio-culturally mediated capacity to act (Rajan 2011, p. 19), but this implies "unconventional, independent or emancipatory actions or practices of individuals who are oppressed or severely constrained" (Parker 2005, p. 3). A person's agency is dependent upon multiple social and cultural factors; at any one time there are both

---

[8] This is based on verse 4:34, *Surah An-Nisa'* of the Quran. According to Quran. com by Sahih International (https://quran.com/4/34/, accessed 17 November 2019) the surah states: "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance—[first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally] strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed Allah is ever Exalted and Grand." Note that Sahih International is a translation of the Quran by three American female converts to Islam and is the default top result that emerges on a Google search. Views on the quality and accuracy of the translation are varied, but it is said to be popular with Salafi-leaning scholars such as Zakir Naik. Further discussion on the context within which this verse was conceived can be found in: Z. Mir-Hosseini, M. Al-Sharmani, and J. Rumminger, *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* (London: Oneworld, 2015).

[9] Added to that are regulations such as those "under the Islamic Family Law of the Federal Territories in Malaysia, where a woman who commits *nusyuz* or disobeys any order lawfully given by her husband has committed an offence and can be fined" (Sisters in Islam 2019, p. 21).

religious and social factors. Discussions of empowerment assume that those who need to be empowered are in "the wrong end of a power relationship" (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002, p. 58). Women are known to negotiate with patriarchy to maximize security and optimize life options; the path of least resistance is sometimes the safest option. At other times, "stillness, aloofness and inactivity signify true power" (Parker 2005, p. 12); the truly powerful could be those who seem the most passive.

In her seminal work on the politics of piety, Saba Mahmood (2005, p. 182) describes how according to Islamic jurisprudence, a woman's foremost duty after marriage "is to her husband and offspring … second only to her responsibility toward God" and how "obedience to one's husband is an obligation to which every Muslim woman is bound" (p. 179). Similarly in Malaysia, and in many Islamic communities worldwide, many women believe that their subordination to men is divinely ordained (EUROPOL 2019), and that their submission is "natural" because a man is physically "stronger" (McLarney 2011, p. 436). Inequalities or "injustices" are not seen as such because they are accepted "as legitimate behaviour patterns", merely the "fate" of women, or justified because women's needs "are less than men's" (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002, p. 51).

Anthropologists note that the application of "Eurocentric ideas of power to Southeast Asia results in skewed interpretations of hierarchy and gender" (Blackwood 2000, p. 11). In Malay society, especially, a woman's sense of self comes from being a "complementary family person … [and there are] complex and dynamic ways that women wield power over those under their control and influence". Hence while hegemonic practices allocate men and women to different spheres, it is not necessarily to the disadvantage of women; they are still primary actors in the negotiation of social meaning.

In her study of female participants of a mosque study circle, Mahmood (2005) disagrees with Western feminists' assessment of agency and the "oppression" of Muslim women. Her observations demonstrate that within the religious framework that Muslim women reside, humans are deemed only partially responsible for their circumstances, thus how a women copes and flourishes within those constraints are in fact her agency.

Power refers to the relations that determine behaviour and is manifested when influence over another is intended, such as when an individual holds the acknowledged right to command, and this right is accepted by others (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002). In Malay-Muslim society, while men hold unquestionable power in the public sphere, Malay-Muslim women resist (or demonstrate agency) by accepting gender roles, but entrenches her centrality in the home (Nuraniyah 2018). This paper will show that some use religion to achieve this. This is thus an illustration of what Parker (2005) describes as a woman being both a victim and an oppressor.

This section of the paper has described the theoretical basis of power relations in a Malay-Muslim home against the backdrop of societal and religious patriarchy. The rest of the paper will sketch the other components that enable a mother to perpetuate exclusivist teachings in the home.

THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF MALAYSIAN MALAY-MUSLIM WOMEN

According to Malaysia's Department of Statistics (2018), the Female Labour Participation Rate (FLPR) is 54.7 per cent. This means that more than half of Malaysian women are gainfully employed. However, there is no indication if this includes informal work such as food sales online or from the home which are common but often unreported. Statistics show that there is only moderate income inequality; for every RM100 earned by a man, a woman earns RM93.80. Of those employed in professional or technical positions, 44.7 per cent are women; but women only make up 27 per cent of the boards of directors in Bursa Malaysia's top 100 companies. Of all companies listed in Bursa Malaysia, only 17 per cent are owned by women (*The Star*, 15 November 2019).

Malaysian women have exceeded men in education: 48.3 per cent reach tertiary levels while only 38.2 per cent of men have attained the same. While there are several prominent women recognized in Malaysian history, they were deemed to only have been working "alongside men … not necessarily on par" with them (Raja Rohana Raja Mamat 1991, p. 13). Roziah Omar notes that even as women's successes have increased, they

maintain their own subordination through *adat* and Islamic discourses in their acceptance of the man as the head of the household and their duties to "bear him children, look after the family, maintain her modesty as well as guard her sexuality and faithfulness" (2003, p. 117). Zuraini Jamil@ Osman (2015, p. 5) cites a Malay proverb as testimony of a woman's role in the home:

> *Sebijak mana pun perempuan itu, tempatnya tetap di dapur.* (Regardless of how smart a woman is, her rightful place is in the kitchen.)

In the SIS survey, even though 94 per cent of the respondents feel that they have a right to work or pursue a career, 68 per cent feel that they are being judged by society for spending too much time at work instead of being with their families. Achieving work-life balance is a struggle faced by 80 per cent of the women; the running of the household remains the responsibility of the women even if they have a job. In a World Bank report, housework is cited as the main constraint preventing women's participation in the labour force, and that expanding the availability, quality and affordability of child and elderly care is key to ensuring that women are able to work (Schmillen et al. 2019).

This concurs with Jamil@Osman's documentation of women's strategies to cope with a full-time job, housework and childcare. Omar (2003) recounted that even after a full day at work, women have to handle housework—especially those who cannot afford domestic help. Another Malay proverb is used to illustrate the importance of a woman's role in the home and to explain why they feel that they have to leave their qualifications behind as soon as they enter the driveway:

> *Air tangan isteri yang memasak untuk suami, akan mengeratkan hubungan kasih sayang.* (The water that drips from the hands of a wife into the food she cooks for the husband will bond the love between husband and wife.) (Roziah Omar 2003, p. 128).

These studies demonstrate that even as Malay-Muslim women can achieve professional success, they voluntarily accede to domestic expectations to

"fulfil their family obligation to be perfect wives and mothers" (Zuraini Jamal@Osman 2015, p. 8) based on the belief that this is what tradition and Islam have dictated for them. They assuage their struggles with the understanding that they will be rewarded in the afterlife and that "reward will be in accordance with the degree of hardship" (EUROPOL 2019, p. 11.)

INCREASING ISLAMIC CONSERVATISM IN MALAYSIA

Several studies have traced the advent of a more conservative brand of Islam in Malaysia. Chandra Muzaffar (1987, p. 2) describes the effort to "re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which is the Islamic human being, guided by the Quran and the Sunnah"; most visibly obvious in the prevalence of religiously sanctioned attire and strict separation between the sexes. Marina Mahathir has also commented on the increasing Arabization in Malaysia, stemming from the belief that "the more like Arabs you are, the better Muslim you are" (*Malay Mail*, 23 May 2015).

Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar of Johor advises Malays not to imitate Arab culture at the expense of Malay traditions (*Star Online*, 24 March 2016), but a 2017 study of Johor citizens' views revealed that 71 per cent disagree that Malay culture is becoming Arabized (Chong et al. 2017). Taken in tandem with other findings that indicate that 90 per cent believe that increased religiosity is positive and that 90 per cent believe that JAKIM (Malaysia's Department of Islamic Development) should regulate Muslim behaviour, it is clear that the people's views differ from that of the monarch's. The administration of Islam in Malaysia is the purview of the royal houses, yet Malaysia's religious administrators argued that Arabization is "not a bad idea" (*Star Online*, 28 August 2016).

Ahmad Fauzi (2016) traces the Salafization of Malaysian Islam to increased engagement with Saudi Arabia and acceptance of Salafi principles into mainstream Sunni Islam, with an overarching (and now increasingly explicitly stated) goal of achieving Islamic statehood. He identifies the sources of political Islam to a generation of Islamic religious

teachers who subscribe to Salafi theological concepts, the acceptance of Salafi theology as standard texts in private and public religious schools and the entry of Salafi-leaning bureaucrats into JAKIM, the civil service and politics. Mohamed Nawab (2017) points out that even as there is increasing interest in and top-level support for Sufism in Malaysia, there is clear evidence of interest in neo-Salafism on the ground, given huge attendance numbers at their seminars and other events.

A 2013 Pew Survey found that 86 per cent of Malaysian Muslims surveyed are in support of sharia law, with 35 per cent believing that sharia is the word of God. While 63 per cent of the respondents indicates concern about religious extremism, 31 per cent pinpoints Christian extremism as the problem. These results suggest that sharia law is not equated with extremism and that when extremism is mentioned, it is observed in the "other" but not in a respondent's own community or faith. A 2015 Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that 48 per cent of Malaysians surveyed are concerned about Islamic extremism—but 11 per cent of all respondents report that they are in support of IS.

Ahmad Fauzi points out that the 2013 surveys indicated that proportionately fewer Malaysian Muslims (8 per cent) worry about Muslim extremist groups than Indonesians (53 per cent), and that more than double the proportion of Malaysians (18 per cent) compared to Indonesians (7 per cent) feel that suicide bombing in defence of Islam is justifiable (2016, p. 2). In a Merdeka Center study of Muslim youth in Southeast Asia (2011), more than 70 per cent of Malaysian youth want the Quran to replace the Federal Constitution and more than 80 per cent identify themselves as Muslims first (before their race or nationality).

Even after having taken into account the potential bias of survey respondents only providing answers that depict them in more socially acceptable (i.e., Islamic) light, the figures are jarring. The trend of increasing radicalization is also reflected in the number of arrests of those exhibiting support for IS or attempting to join the cause; between 1967 and 2015, Malaysia's Special Branch identified twenty-two home-grown militant groups dominated by ex-Afghan *mujahideen* returnees (Tan 2019, p. 178). A steady stream of Malaysians have been recruited by IS; over the last two years, 519 individuals were arrested for terrorism-related charges in Malaysia, 100 travelled to Syria and other

IS-controlled territories and 40 were killed in battle (Singh 2020). Other IS sympathizers travelled to Marawi in the Philippines to assist with the establishment of an Islamic State there. Analysts and the Minister of Defence himself have noted the increased threat of terrorism and extremism which is "on the rise" (*Free Malaysia Today*, 2 December 2019).

It is important to note the number of women who support IS; the Special Branch was reported to have expressed concern about the "marked increase of local women" who join IS in the belief that they will be awarded with "strapping good-looking Middle Eastern husbands, fighting in the name of Islam" (Samuel 2016, p. 64). In May 2018, a Malaysian housewife was among fifteen people arrested; she had plans to launch attacks on non-Muslims by running them down in her car during the 14th General Elections, as well as to crash into non-Muslim places of worship using a gas cylinder as a detonator (*Straits Times*, 1 June 2018). Liow and Arosaie (2019, p. 89) note that there were ten families amongst those who travelled to Syria and Iraq at the height of IS recruitment.

This section has illustrated the backdrop of increasing extremism and support for the IS cause. The following section will highlight additional identities that women embody as mothers and mother-figures, and juxtaposes the Malay stereotype of men in contrast to those roles.

GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND A MOTHER'S EMPOWERMENT

Understanding Men

A gendered analysis requires the examination of both men and women. In her study of urban women and their practices of Islam, Sylvia Frisk (2009, p. 170) took note of the accepted underlying assumptions of male behaviour. In her observation of this upper-middle-class community, she saw that men were described as the weaker sex, and more prone to giving in to their *nafsu* (desires). This was the explanation given for men's tendency to succumb to adultery, alcohol and gambling. While the Quran actually states that men should lower their gaze if confronted with an attractive woman, the men are excused for their infidelity as it is simply

accepted that they have a lack of sexual control; if they were better at controlling their *nafsu*, they would not complain about how women dressed. Women, on the other hand, are thought to have no problems with self-control (Frisk 2009, p. 171).

Raja Rohana outlined the differences between the childhood training of a boy and a girl: whereas the "daughter's days of childhood freedom before she takes on the duties of a 'responsible daughter' is brief", the son "is allowed to enjoy a carefree freedom until such time when he takes over the family responsibility" (1991, p. 18). My observations of men and women's treatment in rural communities over a decade also have parallels to this—it seems to be unsurprising that men would partake in illegal or immoral activities, but a woman is always deemed to be above and beyond this. Young boys are also given the freedom to play (often well into adulthood) while girls are assigned housework duties early on, and expected to quickly get married and bear children as this is supposed to be their primary role in life. Further education or career success for females is seen as secondary and at times, unnecessary or undesirable.

The Mother is Pure and Perfect

The maternalist position and the Cult of True Womanhood of the Victorian Era equates women with motherhood, peace and domesticity. As "keepers of hearth, home and culture", they were perceived to have natural relational qualities, innate emotional decision-making and instinctive dedication to preservation (Gentry 2009, p. 237). Mothers in Asia have long been attributed with God-like qualities, such as Devi Adi Prashakti, or the Divine Mother in Hinduism. In Malaysian popular culture, modern media depictions of the mother in daytime television drama, songs and folklore emphasize her self-sacrificing qualities, long-suffering burden of child-bearing and raising, and the imperative that lies with the children to forever return that sacrifice with unwavering loyalty, devotion and care.

Attaining motherhood is seen as a necessary rite of passage and the primary goal of every Malay-Muslim woman, bringing her untold happiness as described in the proverb:

Sebagai emak mandul baru beranak. (A measure of happiness like a barren mother who is finally able to bear children.)

Women often take the blame when a couple is unable to have children; societal pressure leads to some women accepting their husband's request to marry another in order to have children. The pressure to produce children as soon as a marriage is consummated exerts a great toll; a twenty-three-year-old newlywed from a rural village once told me that she asked her husband to quickly make her pregnant so that no one will say that she is infertile.[10] Add to that the additional pressure that comes from popular media (radio, television and social media) and the overarching belief (held by 97 per cent of all women surveyed by SIS) that "a child is a blessing (*rezeki*), and having many children is a way of God blessing me (*bagi rezeki*)" (2019, p. 27), implying that if she were unable to bear children, she has not received God's blessings. For some, being able to bear a child (and if possible more than one) means being able to add to the Muslim population (*ummah*), a commendable act (Saili and Saili 2018).

Mothers as the Pathway to Heaven

For a single Malay-Muslim woman, marriage lifts her from the bottom rung of the social ladder where her every sin is borne by her father and other male relatives who are deemed responsible for her. Yet in marriage, the common cultural trope is "*syurga di bawah tapak kaki suami*" (heaven is under the feet of your husband)—in line with the understanding that a woman's job is to obey her husband's every word. When she has borne children, however, even as she still remains under the "control" of her husband, she is "empowered" by the belief that for her children, "*syurga di bawah tapak kaki ibu*" (heaven is under the feet of their mother). This belief is supported by a number of hadiths such as:

_____

[10] Conversation with a village local (name withheld) in July 2014.

The Prophet Muhammad (may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him) said: your Heaven lies under the feet of your mother. (Ahmad, Nasai).

God has forbidden for you to be undutiful to your mothers. (Sahih Al-Bukhari)

A man once consulted the Prophet Muhammad about taking part in a military campaign. The Prophet asked the man if his mother was still living. When told that she was alive, the Prophet said [Then] stay with her, for Paradise is at her feet. (Al-Tirmidhi)[11]

The Mother is the Bastion of Religion in the Home

While it may seem contrary to the understanding of patriarchal Malay society and Islam, the above discussion of the weakness of men, as well as the expectation of self-control and purity of women lend themselves to the belief that mothers are the bastions of religion in the home. It is within domestic power dynamics that a woman is able to expand her space of influence to balance externally imposed inequalities (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002). Frisk notes that the women she studied have an overwhelming desire to "submit to the will of a transcendental God", and that this submission requires a "transformation in the husband's religious behaviour and attitude" (2009, p. 187). A woman's ability to evolve her husband into a better Muslim allows her first of all to follow in the ideology, and secondly demonstrates her agency in exerting influence over her husband and children (Von Knop 2007). This appears to be a common way through which non-Western women resist the patriarchy and become empowered.

---

[11] These hadiths were found online at https://www.soundvision.com/article/the-quran-and-hadith-on-mothers (accessed 21 October 2019) and are taken at face value by the writer; they have not been verified through Islamic means as valid or correctly interpreted, but these are the common tropes used and repeated to strengthen the belief that the pathway to heaven is through a mother.

Mahmood (2005) differed slightly in her analysis of Muslim women's responsibility to ensure religious behaviour in those around her. She observed that her subjects believe that while a husband is accountable for his wife's virtue, the wife is only responsible for her own moral conduct and that of her children. However, she may try to ensure that her husband lives according to religious requirements so that she is able to live and raise children in a more virtuous household, without the negative examples set by one who is insufficiently pious.

In a workshop by Ustadha Farhat Naik, wife of the Indian Islamist preacher and Malaysian permanent resident Zakir Naik, on how to raise "Noble Generations",[12] she emphasized that women are the "fortress against the devil" and that women need to "protect our husbands from the whisper of the Satan". She then told the audience that if they were able to make their child love them, the child would become their [Islamic] "missionary throughout—developing the love for God has to be done by the mother".

Mahmood (2005) noted many discussions about "disobedient husbands" and how religious teachers responded to their queries. The women were taught myriad tactics to encourage a husband to change his conduct, failing which then they were to decide whether to live with him but take extra caution with their own piety (because of his negative influence) or to divorce him because their duty to God was more important than that to a husband.

This section has highlighted the multiple identities that Malay-Muslim mothers have within the domestic sphere. While a Western feminist view might assess a woman's primary place in the home as subjugation, in the local context, "a woman's internalisation of… gendered values cannot be simply viewed from the binary lens of submission or resistance because it involves a complex process of resistance to certain structures of authority" (Nuraniyah, 2018, p. 904) and this is the empowerment that

---

[12] The workshop by Ustadha Farhat Naik, "Women's Movement for Creating Noble Generations" was held on 12 October 2019 in Kota Damansara, Selangor.

women in this cultural context exercise in order to resist patriarchy in the public sphere. The relevance of these roles are discussed further in the following section, which details the results of the on-ground research.

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

The stimulus for this study came from rural communities, where I observed the treatment of women under patriarchal norms. These include restrictions on their movements and actions (ranging from being unable to attend social functions alone or participating in public activities such as exercise or sport); discouragement from higher education or employment far from home; pressure to marry young and have children; exclusion from family or community decision-making; and the constant need to behave in accordance with society's expectations so as to not sully the family name. This misogyny not only comes from husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, but also from women themselves; either in the form of controls inflicted by a mother on her daughter, or by peers and relatives who chastise other females for choices that do not abide by patriarchal norms.

In contrast to that, however, there are many signs that women work within the constraints to establish personal power centres in the home. One approach is to entrench Malay *adat* in terms of ritual practices and reminders of the importance of a mother. A mother ensures that she is the centre of attention by constantly holding family feasts and celebrations tied to cultural or religious practices and requiring that her offspring and spouse are present. A mother's ability to hold court and manage the organisation of celebratory occasions also emphasises her centrality in the home.

When there is nothing to celebrate, the mother reminds her family of her importance through daily contact through social media; forwarding images or short dramatic videos on the consequences of disobeying a mother, (illness, accidents and other misfortune), story-telling or mealtime discussions of moral takeaways from daytime television dramas (often along the same lines as the social media videos) and the need to always remember her sacrifices for her children. All of these are underlined with religious undertones, obligations or consequences.

Not unlike the women in Frisk's study (2009), the rural women I observed try to ensure that their spouses pray regularly and attend religious ceremonies. They also constantly remind their children to fulfil their religious requirements, be it prayer, giving to charity or fasting. Often-heard tropes in the villages are as follows (translated verbatim):

> If you don't do as God wants us to do [fulfil religious requirements], you will prevent me from going to heaven as I will bear your sins.

> Your path to heaven is through me, so if you don't do as I say [fulfil religious requirements] you will not get to heaven.

> The best way for you to get to heaven is to work hard so that you can save money so that we [the parents] can go to hajj [pilgrimage]; this is the duty of all children.

These reminders are then backed up by relevant social media messages that emphasize the importance of abiding by a mother's religious reminders for everyone's good. Most of the offspring that I observed take these messages to heart and often attribute misfortune to their not following the orders of their mother, or sharing social media posts about her importance and gratitude for all her child-raising suffering. These observations indicate that the mothers are successful in the exertion of control over their children.

Amongst peers or female relatives, daily chatter often revolves around how well children or grandchildren are able to recite the Quran, pray or fast; who amongst them have taken the virtuous step of sending their children to Islamic schools or won scholarships to Islamic education abroad; or which of their daughters has married the next eligible religious person in the village. Pride is expressed in how they are able to control their spouses in making them fast or pray, or in preventing him from spending time with his friends every evening, and instead have him stay at home to teach the children prayer, or at least send them to religious classes. At times it seems to be a competition to see who holds the next religious feast (*kenduri*) and which groups from the Islamic missionary schools (*tahfiz*) are invited to recite prayers at those events. Empowerment for these women come from peer or relative recognition of their religious

successes in this way; being able to bring the family closer to God is an indication of personal achievement and status.

In speaking to gender and radicalization experts on the possibility of these rural scenarios resulting in the spread of intolerant, exclusivist attitudes (should the mothers inadvertently listen to the wrong preachers), I was redirected to urban areas where this is already happening.

In the Urban Centres

In wealthy upper-middle-class neighbourhoods around Kuala Lumpur, many women attend *usrahs* (study circles) to improve their understanding of religion. Frisk observed these meetings in her research, and noted that they often comprise women who have retired or abandoned their careers to focus on religion. Not unlike the ritual feasts and other events arranged by rural mothers, these are important social events and "arenas for competing claims by groups of pious women as to how to be good Muslims" (2009, p. 158). While the celebratory or religious gatherings I observed in rural areas are mixed-sex family and community events, these women-only study circles serve the same affirmative purpose: an individual's presence at the events indicates their piety and commitment to God. The urban women studied by Frisk also hosted collective community rituals as a public demonstration of their religious agency.

The informants that I spoke with described both these mixed-sex community gatherings and private women-only study sessions.[13] The community sessions are often hosted by wealthy individuals, with popular non-Malaysian preachers, who would at times remind their hosts that a contribution to the Islamic cause (by hosting the event, which also serves as a channel for the collection of donations for various Islamic charities) would earn them merit and offset any sins or extravagance

---

[13] For this section in particular, information on the community prayer events came from an individual who worked in a women's rights organization whose family members hosted popular preachers for the community. (Interview conducted on 23 July 2019 in Petaling Jaya.) Information on the women's-only study circles came from research collaborator Vilashini Solmiah in Kuala Lumpur over a series of meetings in July, September and October 2019.

they may have had in their lives. With many of the hosts nearing or in retirement, concerns about the afterlife loom large. Not unlike those I observed in rural areas, these events seem to be a competition; in wealthy urban areas, the contest centres on how lavish the events are, what food is provided, and how much in donations is collected.

The highlight of urban *usrahs* is the amount of donations raised. While some of this is instigated by Islamic social media influencers,[14] others are encouraged by the guest preacher. The women are often told that as they are too old to perform *hijrah*, the best way to support the Islamic cause is to donate to it. In these *usrahs*, women are urged to contribute online (through their phones) during the session, and donations are projected onto a screen in real time. The informants mention that tens of thousands of Malaysian ringgit could be collected in this way. While these contributions are requested to "defend Islam", the women do not ask where the money is going; their only interest is to demonstrate how generous they are in the name of Islam.[15]

Other means of demonstrating superiority among urban women is in their ability to access popular preachers online; a woman's Internet/technological savvy enables her to broaden her knowledge beyond Malaysia's borders. Nuraniyah (2018) notes that the Internet enables women's activism in extremist groups; it is a new space for women's voices and an area where women can circumvent the patriarchy and state

---

[14] These were said to be Malaysian women who had moved overseas, and were of the government-approved Sunni school of thought, but by virtue of being overseas and having access to a wider breadth of religious knowledge (given JAKIM's restrictions within Malaysia), held great influence over local women.

[15] Another informant who conducts anti-terrorism research for a government agency mentioned that collections after religious seminars hosted by large Malaysian corporations for their staff are also known to be channelled towards terrorism funding—these collections also leverage on an individual's need to demonstrate their commitment to the Islamic cause. (Interview conducted on 16 October 2019.) Nuraniyah (2018) reports on Indonesian female migrant workers' support of terrorism by purchasing flight tickets for jihadis and financing terror attacks.

restrictions on information. There are no controls over the information that is spread through these channels.

While the study circles provide a sense of belonging for women in search of answers, there are also virtual sisterhoods that provide support for the jihadist cause. Von Knop (2007) wrote of the Radical Sisterhood which has representatives all over Europe and a strong online presence. Groups like these discuss ideological issues, and provide advice on how to best educate children and persuade husbands to follow the "right" practices. They provide guidance for women in difficulty and an Islamic solution to ease problems and tension—a welcoming community that gives a voice to women and are often openly supportive of the IS cause. They promote "the dream of living a pure, true Islam" and create an online echo chamber that has infrequent dissent due to a self-reinforcing group logic, which then encourages participants to isolate themselves from those who are not part of the "sisterhood" (Pearson 2015; CPRLV 2016).

Of the sessions around Kuala Lumpur, my informants mentioned that some of the participants they were in touch with eventually refused further contact, as they had been advised by their teachers to stay away from those outside the *usrahs*. Other informants noted the increasing religiosity of friends who were involved in these sessions, and who then either disappeared from social media or posted extremely religious content, alienating former friends and contacts.[16] This behaviour is emblematic of Salafi approaches as they encourage isolation from those who are non-Muslim or inadequately Muslim (Kruglanski et al. 2014).

Feminist researchers often argue that women are unjustly denied their agency to act for political purposes by associating their actions with emotions, a need to be part of an in-group or as mere followers of a cause. Morgan (1989, p. 84) states that "all organized religion—

---

[16] These informants provided links to preachers that their friends followed and described behavioural changes in those who got involved with more exclusivist versions of Islam (their deduction based on what they saw being posted online). Interviews were conducted on 24 and 25 July 2019 in Shah Alam and Kota Damansara.

and fundamentalist interpretations of religion in particular—has always been a 'political movement'"; a woman exhibits agency in deciding to join a group to learn more or act in the name of religion. Nuraniyah (2018, p. 900) reported that the women she observed are active seekers of religious knowledge and try various venues before opting to follow Salafi preachers because their sessions are frequently peppered with Quranic verses and deemed "more intellectual … [and] a better source of knowledge".

Other informants talked about the content of the urban *usrahs*;[17] the idea of the wider Muslim *ummah* is often invoked; one participant mentioned that in her session, the preacher said "we are one *ummah*, and when one part of the *ummah* is hurt [such as in Syria], it is like a part of our body—when one arm hurts, the other will feel the pain. So we must stop that pain—and you must encourage your husbands and sons to go fight for the cause."[18]

Observations of Farhat Naik's seminar to a group of upper-middle-income women in Kota Damansara, Selangor, are indicative of group behaviour as examined through social movement theory (Borum 2011). Similar to those who join online sisterhood forums (CPRLV 2016), the women in attendance at the seminar were seeking answers, and possibly going through periods of vulnerability (as indicated by the comments and questions they asked after the session.[19] They had issues that they needed help dealing with (the context from which the process of radicalization cannot be separated), and were open to views that would help them

---

[17] These informants had attended these sessions and were disturbed by the content and eventually dropped out of subsequent sessions. Some also commented on friends who had become more religious (and usually were their entry to the sessions they attended). Most lost touch with the women who initially brought them into the *usrahs*.

[18] Interview conducted on 26 July 2019 in Bangi, Selangor.

[19] It is interesting to note that the women attending this workshop seemed more needy and uncertain of the teachings of Islam. They were looking for solutions to their problems and were willing to accept and believe everything that the speaker put forward—especially as she peppered her presentation with quotations from the Quran in Arabic (with no translation). In contrast, the women at the Sisters In Islam conference (October 2019), who appeared to be from the same socio-

solve their problems. They decided that religion would be the source of those answers, and in joining these groups were able to identify with the messages given—the group's narrative and ethos made sense to them. As the women accepted the group's frames of reference, they began to identify with those they engaged with and, with group socialization, are indoctrinated into the movement (i.e., the more exclusivist, neo-Salafi approach to Islam).

Farhat Naik encouraged the raising of children "overflowing in their love of Allah", she recommended that women tell their children stories of "the warriors of Islam" and their successes. While she did not focus on pooling contributions from the audience, she implored them to donate even the smallest amount "in the way of Allah" as "cleansing ourselves and our wealth guarantees success" and "purifying our wealth brings us closer to Allah".

In her study of extremist preachers such as Zakir Naik, Vilashini Solmiah observed that they are successful in luring their audiences because they begin their sessions with more benign, moderate matters. Hence if a session is three hours long, the first two hours will endear the audience with well-balanced content, widely citing religious texts and convincing them that the preacher is moderate and knowledgeable. The subsequent hour then slides into pointing out how the preacher has often been victimized, invoking sympathy and anger (as the audience is already convinced of his positive qualities). The preacher then points out the common qualities of those who have an agenda against him; that they are all non-Muslims, and the more exclusivist, intolerant trope begins— neatly persuading those listening to him to be more wary and less trusting of those who do not believe as they do (or have been taught to believe by the preacher). I saw the same traits in other online preachers' sessions, and at Farhat Naik's talk. Towards the end of her session, she added

---

economic class as those who attended the Kota Damansara workshop were not in search of answers; they knew where the verses that they could refer to in the Quran were, and discussed them at length (in English). These women were fully aware of the rights that Islam accorded them and had a deep understanding of the faith, but used the session to share experiences and learn from each other in their efforts to improve human rights through Islam.

stories of how detractors were abusing their family and how Muslims had to rise to help those who are oppressed worldwide.

Vilashini commented that many of these preachers function as cult leaders would, and the people who listen to them are part of their commune; she also highlighted instances of domestic ritual devotion where a photo of the preacher is hung in the home for the family to kiss before bed. Indications of the cult-like following that Zakir Naik has was evident in the session I attended (notwithstanding that the speaker is his wife), as it began with prayers and thanks for Zakir Naik and his contributions to the *ummah* and Islam, and ended with encouragement for the people to constantly pray for his and his family's safety and well-being. Other informants have recounted *usrahs* where followers kiss the feet of a preacher and are given mysterious sweets (*manisan*) to consume so that they will be able to "visualize the prophet" by the end of the sermon.

Other *usrahs* held in this location by the same organizers of the Farhat Naik seminar had similar characteristics to that described by Vilashini; a series of workshops on a single chapter in the Quran begin with discussions on sex—an unexpected angle, yet one that invokes interest and encourages participants to stay on for subsequent sessions. The seminars however, become increasingly focused on minor details, revealing the highly literal, micro-managed approach to Islam that is characteristic of Salafi interpretations.

Intolerance of other faiths was also evident on at least two occasions. One informant mentioned that the centre responded to a question on whether classes would continue on a public holiday with "We do not acknowledge Deepavali".[20] During the session by Farhat Naik, a girl not

---

[20] In Malaysia, conservative preachers remind the public that they are not to wish others on their major festive holidays (such as Christmas or Deepavali) as it reduces their own faith and makes them apostate; Muslims are only to wish other Muslims on their own religious occasions. New Year celebrations are also deemed a Christian celebration. Hence to "not acknowledge" Deepavali could be a continuation of this line of thought or a complete disavowal of any other faith but Islam as is taught in Salafi beliefs. Interview was conducted on 12 October 2019.

older than fifteen years asked how she is to explain to her friends that music is not allowed in Islam (a highly conservative interpretation of the faith). Farhat Naik responded that if she was speaking to non-Muslims about Islam, she needs to begin with other topics that are easier to convey. The girl's bewildered response was "but I am Muslim, I don't have non-Muslim friends". These are examples of the exclusivist, intolerant interpretation of Islam that is being practised and disseminated.

The presence of all-women *usrahs*, online sisterhood forums and sessions such as those by Farhat Naik indicate that it is women inviting other women to the Islamic cause. Other informants reveal a number of high-profile female recruits and recruiters; it is clear that the young teenagers at Farhat Naik's session were there with their elders.

Kinship relations and multi-generational jihadi families are not uncommon. Hwang and Schulze (2018) trace how Indonesian jihadis are drawn into the cause by female relatives, parents and teachers, growing into a jihadi community from birth. It is clear then, that mothers who (intentionally or otherwise) follow a more exclusivist interpretation of Islam can and will teach that version to their offspring.

Taking the Message Back to the Rural Fringes

While much of the evidence of extremist teachings were found in wealthier urban communities, the rural fringes are not spared the reach of conservative Islam. During the 1980s Islamic resurgence, universities spread a more literal Islam to rural areas through the Muslim Youth Islamic Movement (ABIM) (Ong 1995). Informants mentioned that there was a female preacher who was now disseminating a new "empowering" (for women) version of Islam in the nation's top universities not unlike that promoted by more exclusivist groups. While information on this preacher had not yet been fully verified, followers were said to have been tasked with starting study cells in their hometowns and villages, focusing primarily on single mothers and second (or subsequent) wives. These would be women who may have wanted to improve their lot in life by following a more "feminine interpretation" of the faith.

While the rural communities I observed did not have lavish women-only home-based study, women did gather at mosques for religious

classes; also social events to share gossip, demonstrate piety and negotiate social standing through religious achievements. In the southwest of Johor, local informants tell me that the preachers at these sessions are all Malaysian, as any outsider would be too visible and stick out too much in a closed and somewhat xenophobic community such as this.[21] Online preachers that are followed are mainly those that the Johor Queen posts on her Facebook and Instagram pages; she is known to be inclusive and progressive in her views on Islam. Johor's approach to Islam (as mandated by its Sultan) is the Kaum Tua tradition, which is rich in Sufi practices (Norshahril 2017).

However, a top-down directive on the "acceptable" form of Islam does not guarantee that a state's citizens will necessarily follow suit. The Johor Survey (Chong et al. 2017) showed a deviance between the Sultan's views and respondents' views on Islam, and it is possible that a more conservative brand of Islam has permeated the ground. Online preachers are easily accessible and a drive through local villages and suburbs reveal myriad advertisements for seminars by preachers in full religious insignia, promoting content that does not seem as inclusive as the messages from the royal palace.

Given the prevalence of patriarchy in rural societies, it is not unlikely that local women might begin to take up a more "feminine" approach to Islam that empowers them to study the Quran on their own, in addition to buttressing their knowledge so that they can better guide their families on the rightful religious path. Vilashini pointed out that urban *usrahs* have become a benchmark that rural women aspire to. As there are no boundaries to accessing online Islamic influencers or preachers (notwithstanding their respect for their royalty), conditions on the ground could change. As it is, over the last twelve years of my immersion in this community, more Islamic missionary schools have sprung up; some

---

[21] These observations were taken in Johor, a state where PAS is not seen in such positive light given the Sultan's disapproval of their and JAKIM's approach to Islam. There is great respect for the Johor royal family in this community, and as a result, they are often duty-bound to follow in the royal footsteps when it comes to religion. Interviews conducted on 6 and 25 September 2019 in Johor.

parents have pulled their children out of government schools to put them in a *tahfiz* full-time. While they are not the majority, there are also increasing numbers of youth dressed in the Arabic attire of turbans, robes and full-faced veils.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that Malaysian Malay-Muslim women who are faced with the pressures of patriarchy in the public sphere, and who, by tradition and religious beliefs, are pressured into leaving professional successes at the door to tend to domestic duties, may find an outlet for personal empowerment and peer recognition through religion. A gendered analysis of the roles and identities of women (and men) in the home has shown that a woman can gain power by wielding religion as a tool to control or influence her family.

Scholars disagree on whether it is Salafi or Sufi interpretations which have become more mainstream in Malaysia, but it needs to be said that the two approaches to Islam are not on opposite ends of an extremist spectrum. As mentioned earlier, there are "quietist Salafi" groups and highly radical Sufi groups. It is the general consensus, however, that hateful extremism in Malaysia has undoubtedly increased. This paper does *not* claim that given the increasing accessibility and emerging acceptability of exclusivist Salafi teachings, everyone (especially mothers) are on the road to becoming suicide bombers or jihadi soldiers.

The Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV 2016) has drawn a distinction between "radicalization" and "radicalization leading to violence". In essence radicalization indicates that "there is a logic of rupture and radical ideological drift that can lead a person to consider the use of violence against others", which, when taken in tandem with the Pew Research (2013) finding that 18 per cent of those surveyed felt suicide bombing in defence of Islam is justified, can be somewhat alarming. According to CPRLV, there are two steps to violence; firstly a "withdrawal into ideological certainties, accompanied by a totalizing and exclusive way of interpreting the world", then secondly, a "belief in the use of violence to promote that vision of the world".

It is also important to note the difference between Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi ideology; Salafi interpretations are strict declarations that the "smallest deviation [is] tantamount to *shirik* or polytheism and there is an obsession with Islamic purification". Salafi jihadism, on the other hand, aims to "replace the secular political system with an Islamic one through armed revolution … [while] purification only concerns religious matters—i.e. ridding Islam of superstitions" (Nuraniyah 2018, p. 901). Many Salafis, in not wanting to be associated with terrorism, decry the antics of Salafi jihadis—as they do in Malaysia. Malay and Islamic political parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) often disassociate themselves from terrorism and accuse each other of being Salafi, even as each attempts to demonstrate their Islamic credentials.

Ahmad Fauzi (2016) has outlined how, in spite of the political rhetoric and denials, much of mainstream Islam in Malaysia has already adopted Salafi views, including the adoption of *Tauhid 3*, a Salafi theology and literalist doctrine that "purportedly paves the way to violence" (Ahmad Fauzi 2016, p. 21). Samuel also highlights how certain radicalized narratives provides the "mood music" for acts of terrorism, and that some non-violent radical groups can be "conveyor belts" to violent extremism as "religious extremism is inherently violent" (2016, p. 75).

However, Liow and Arosaie (2019) posit that because Malaysia already functions as a de facto Islamic nation (although the Constitution states otherwise) given the constitutionally-defined preferential treatment to Malay-Muslims, the Islamic bureaucracy helmed by JAKIM, the supremacy of political Islam, and political parties' attempts at proving their "Islamic credentials", there is little real need for Malaysians to support IS (the organization). The lure of IS lies in its counternarrative to non-Islamic nations, especially where Muslims are a minority. In Malaysia where there is already an Islamic hegemony, outright support for IS, *hijrah* and radicalized violence is reduced.

The idea that mothers would perpetuate exclusivist and extremist theology in their family has been hard to swallow largely because mothers are believed to be a "peace-making ally against violence" (Winterbotham and Pearson 2016); that they would not have the political mettle or agenda to support extremism (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015); and

that "killing is an unnatural female behaviour" (Åhäll 2012). It was for these reasons that the United Kingdom's counterterrorism strategy, which was to rope in Muslim mothers to report on their children or other family members if they were to join the IS cause, failed (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Winterbotham and Pearson 2016). The women would rather preserve the family unit and stability than report on a possible but yet unproven security threat.

It goes against the grain to believe that a mother is capable of sustained wrongdoing; they are usually seen as victims of violence rather than perpetrators (Cunningham 2003). But the Surabaya bombings of 2018 have proven that it is possible.[22] Media reports have highlighted that, of those known to travel from Southeast Asia to the Islamic State, it was "the daughters and wives in the group who were more determined than the men" (Jones 2018). Winterbotham and Pearson (2016) emphasize that it "would be wrong to assume that [supporters of Daesh[23]] were always men". Åhäll (2012) writes of the Patriotic Mother, who is an "ever-ready womb for war" and where motherhood is a weapon as "multi-birthing women give life to many new fighters" and the Spartan Mother, who is "heroic and patriotic because she sacrifices her sons for the greater good of the nation-state".

The above discussion has shown that all the factors that can contribute to a nest of extremist nurturing in the home are present. Rajan (2011) has written about Palestinian women who want to be "mothers of martyrs" as it gives them honour, glory and recognition. Gentry and Sjoberg (2015, p. 74) point out that "mothering violent men is mothering no less". At the very least, as shown in the UK counterterrorism failure, these mothers will not inform the authorities about family members' intentions to participate in jihad. In fact, in the worst cases, they will encourage it and give their blessings.

---

[22] Since then there have been several more arrests of women in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia for plotting terror or charged as supporters of ISIS; comprising mothers or housewives, students and migrant workers.

[23] Daesh is the Arab acronym for IS.

A WAY FORWARD

Given the physical collapse of the Islamic State, there are now many returnees waiting to be repatriated to their homelands, including Malaysia. A 2017 report by the Soufan Centre noted that at the time there were ninety-one Malaysians in ISIS ranks, of which twelve were women and seventeen were children. Khalil (2019) points out that counterterrorism officials have been preparing for the return of male foreign fighters, but are hugely unprepared for returning women and children. Amalina Abdul Nasir (2019) reports that Malaysia's deradicalization programme for male returnees is only one month long; women and children are deemed to "have had no decision-making powers over their migration to Syria" and are thus assessed on a case-by-case basis and monitored when allowed to return to their villages.

Even as female returnees may claim to have been only housewives and mothers, Khalil (2019) points out that IS considers their female supporters "a key to their future survival", and that some female returnees have declared that "even if we haven't been able to keep [the Islamic State], our children will one day get it back". Abdul Nasir (2019) warns that "racial and religious issues, especially those which can be exploited to suggest Islam is under threat in Malaysia, can be scavenged by IS to keep its radical ideology alive among potential extremists in the country". Today's intensification of political Islam worsens the situation.

There may be other ways to reduce the potential nurturing of extremist values within the home. Ahmad Fauzi (2016) recommends opening the space for discussions on Islam, allowing alternative views and debates on what is deemed "deviant", and ensuring proper Islamic jurisprudence instead of enabling JAKIM in its Islamic hegemony. Socio-economic empowerment for the poor and vulnerable (including opportunities for all women to attain social recognition through employment, careers or education beyond religious matters) may alleviate pressures (Badran 2006; Abbas 2009; Kharroub 2015; Butale 2017; Nair and Chong 2017; Rahman 2017).

Sharifah Munirah Alatas (2019) notes that in Malaysia today, there is a "sublime and invasive ideology of prejudice that is holding back reform". It will take generations to reverse or remove patriarchal

traditions, attitudes and behaviours (if this is at all possible), and it is impossible to monitor mothers within the home to determine what and how they are teaching their families about religion. But it could be possible to better monitor those who teach them, or those that they reach out to for religious knowledge. D'Estaing (2017) notes that while women might be central to the spread (or prevention) of extremist teachings, the onus should not be placed solely on their shoulders; "good governance and the role of the state in preventing violent extremism … [and] social, economic, security initiatives [are required] to incite notable change". The new Pakatan Harapan government needs to move beyond Islamic politics and begin work on improving conditions on the ground to ensure that exclusivist views of Islam that could be detrimental to Malaysian society at large, are not perpetuated in the home.

REFERENCES

Abbas, T. 2009. "Muslim Radicalisation's Socio-Economic Roots". *The Guardian*, 29 April 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/apr/29/islam-terrorism-radicalisation-recession (accessed 27 July 2018).

Åhäll, L. 2012. "Motherhood, Myth and Gendered Agency in Political Violence". *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 1: 103–20.

Ahmad Fauzi A.H. 2016. *The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam*. Trends in Southeast Asia no. 9/2016. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Alatas, S.M. 2019. "Understanding Extremism among Malaysian Muslims". *Free Malaysia Today*, 20 May 2019. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2019/05/20/understanding-extremism-among-malaysian-muslims/ (accessed 20 October 2019).

Amalina Abdul Nasir. 2019. "Countering the Visible and Potent Threat of Islamic State in Malaysia". *Today Online*, 24 September 2019. https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/islamic-state-wants-stay-relevant-and-visible-malaysia-how-can-terror-threat-be-overcome.

Badran, M. 2006. "Women and Radicalisation". *DIIS Working Paper No. 2006/5*. Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Blackwood, E. 2000. *Webs of Power*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Borum, R. 2011. "Radicalisation into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories". *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4: 7–36.

Butale, C. 2017. "The Nexus between Gender Inequality and Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa". 30 March 2017. www.iapss.org/wp/2017/03/30/the-nexus-between-gender-inequality-and-violent-extremism-in-sub-saharan-africa/ (accessed 27 July 2018).

Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV). 2016. *Women and Violent Radicalization: Research Report*. Quebec, Canada: Conseil du Statu de la Femme.

Chan, F. 2017. "ISIS Returnees Pose Major Terror Threat". *Straits Times*, 25 October 2017. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-returnees-pose-major-terror-threat (accessed 27 July 2018).

Chandra Muzaffar. 1987. *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*. Michigan: Oxford Fajar.

Chong, T., Lee H.G., N. Saat, and S. Rahman. 2017. *The 2017 Johor Survey: Selected Findings*. Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 20/2017. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE). 2019. *Challenging Hateful Extremism* (Summary Version). United Kingdom. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/836540/Challenging_Hateful_Extremism_-_summary_report.pdf (accessed 1 February 2020).

Cunningham, K.J. 2003. "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26: 171–95.

d'Estaing S.G. 2017. "Engaging Women in Countering Violent Extremism: Avoiding Instrumentalisation and Furthering Agency". *Gender & Development* 25, no. 1: 103–18.

Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2018. "Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains". https://www.dosm.gov.my/

v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=SGMzVDh0cVUwK0t6SG
N6UzhwN1dmdz09 (accessed 31 October 2019).

Deshmukh-Ranadive, J. 2002. *Space for Power: Women's Work and Family Strategies in South and Southeast Asia*. Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies.

EUROPOL. 2019. "Women in Islamic State Propaganda: Roles and Incentives". *Euorpol Specialist Reporting.* https://www.europol. europa.eu/activities-services/europol-specialist-reporting/women-in-islamic-state-propaganda (accessed 1 October 2019).

Free Malaysia Today. 2017. "Marina: Saudis to Blame for Malaysia's 'Arabisation': Loss of Local Culture". 25 November 2017. https:// www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/11/25/marina-saudis-to-blame-for-malaysias-arabisation-loss-of-local-culture/ (accessed 28 May 2019).

Frisk, S. 2009. *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Ganor, B. 2002. "Defining Terrorism: Is One Man's Terrorist Another Man's Freedom Fighter?". *Media Asia* 29, no. 3: 123–33.

Gentry, C.E. 2009. "Twisted Maternalism: From Peace to Violence". *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 2: 235–52.

———, and L. Sjoberg. 2015. *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics*. London: Zed Books.

Hirschmann, C. 2016. "Gender, the Status of Women and Family Structure in Malaysia". *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* 53, no. 1: 33–50.

Hwang, J.C., and K.E. Schulze. 2018. "Why they Join: Pathways into Indonesian Jihadist Organisations". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6: 911–32.

Ili Aqila, and C. Chung. 2019. "Rafidah: Why Stop at 30 percent?". *The Star*, 15 November 2019, p. 3.

Jamestown Foundation. 2019. "Women in Jihad: Militant Leadership Monitor Special Report – Personalities behind the Insurgency". https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Special-Report-Women-in-Jihad-2.pdf?x97873 (accessed 1 October 2019).

Jones, S. 2018. "Surabaya and the ISIS Family". *The Interpreter*, Lowy

Institute. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/surabaya-and-isis-family (accessed 27 July 2018).

Kamarulnizam A. and Mohd Afandi S. 2015. "Conceptualizing Jihad among Southeast Asia's Radical Salafi Movements". *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 14, no. 42: 2–28.

Karim, W.J. 1987. "The Status of Malay Women in Malaysia: From Culture to Islam and Industrialisation". *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 17, no. 1: 41–55.

Kasztelan, M. 2015. "Polygamy Inc: How Global Ikhwan Is Becoming a Lifestyle Choice for Many Devout Muslims". *South China Morning Post*, 18 July 2015. https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1840091/polygamy-inc-how-global-ikhwan-becoming-lifestyle-choice (accessed 1 February 2020).

Kaur, M. 2019. "Mat Sabu Tables 10-year White Paper on Defence". *Free Malaysia Today*, 2 December 2019. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/12/02mat-sabu-tables-10-year-white-paper-on-defence/ (accessed 15 December 2019).

Khalil, L. 2019. "Behind the Veil: Women in Jihad after the Caliphate". Lowy Institute www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/behind-veil-women-jihad-after-caliphate (accessed 31 October 2019).

Kharroub, T. 2015. "Understanding Violent Extremism: The Social Psychology of Identity and Group Dynamics". The Arab Centre, 25 September 2015. http://arabcenterdc.org/research-paper/understanding-violent-extremism-the-social-psychology-of-identity-and-group-dynamics/ (accessed 27 July 2018).

Kruglanski, A.W., M.J. Gelfand, J.J. Bélanger, A. Sheveland, M. Hetiarachchi, and R. Gunaratna. 2014. "The Psychology of Radicalisation and Deradicalisation: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism". *Advances in Political Psychology* 3, no. 1: 69–93.

Lahoud, N. 2014. "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5: 780–802.

Liow, J.C., and A. Arosaie. 2019. "The Sound of Silence: Nuancing Religiopolitical Legitimacy and Conceptualising the Appeal of ISIS in Malaysia". *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 41, no. 1: 86–113.

Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

McCauley, C.R. and S. Moskalenko.2011. *Friction: How Radicalisation Happens to Them and Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McLarney, E. 2011. "The Islamic Public Sphere and the Discipline of *Adab*". *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43: 429–99.

Merdeka Center, 2011. "Values, Dreams, Ideals: Muslim Youth in Southeast Asia". Surveys in Malaysia and Indonesia. http://www.goethe.de/ins/id/pro/jugendstudie/REPORT percent20Malaysias percent20Final.pdf (accessed 7 July 2018).

Mohamed Nawab M.O. 2016. "The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia: Impact and Future Trajectories". *Contemporary Islam* 11: 1–20.

Morgan, R. 1989. *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*. London: Piatkus.

Nair, T., and A. Chong. 2017. "Radicalisation of the Female Worker". *East Asia Forum,* 10 August 2017. http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/08/radicalisation-of-the-female-worker/ (accessed 27 July 2018).

Neumann, P.R. 2013. "The Trouble with Radicalisation". *International Affairs* 89, no. 4: 873–93.

Norshahril Saat. 2017. *Johor Remains the Bastion of Kaum Tua*. Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 1/2017. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Nuraniyah, N. 2018. "Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalisation of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6: 890–910.

Omar, R. 2003. "Negotiating Their Visibility: The Lives of Educated and Married Malay Women". *In Women in Malaysia – Breaking Boundaries*, edited by R. Omar and A. Hamzah. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors.

Ong, A. 1995. "State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies , and the Body Politic in Malaysia". In *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, edited by A. Ong and M.G. Peletz. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Parker, L., ed. 2005. *The Agency of Women in Asia*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic.

Pearson, E. 2015. "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalisation, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad". *Policy Studies Organisation*: 1944-2866. Oxford: Wiley Periodicals Inc.

Pew Research Centre. 2013. *Extremism Concerns Growing in West and Predominantly Muslim Countries.* https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/07/16/extremism-concerns-growing-in-west-and-predominantly-muslim-countries/ (accessed 27 July 2018).

———. 2015. "Global Attitudes Spring 2015 Survey". https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/23/key-takeaways-on-how-the-world-views-the-u-s-and-china/country-survey-map_web/ (accessed 27 July 2018).

Rahman, S. 2018. "Should Malaysia Expect an Islamic Backlash?". *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2018/54, 11 September 2018.

Raja Rohana Raja Mamat. 1991. *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia: Social and Legal Perspectives*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Rajan, V.G.J. 2011. *Women Suicide Bombers: Narratives of Violence*. Oxon: Routledge.

Ridzi, F. 2009. "Private/ Public Sphere". In *Encyclopaedia of Gender and Society*, edited by J. O'Brien. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412964517.n343 (accessed 10 June 2019).

Rodzi, N.H. 2018. "Student, Housewife among 15 Terror Suspects Held in Malaysia for Planning Attacks". *Straits Times,* 1 June 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/student-housewife-among-15-terror-suspects-held-in-malaysia (accessed 27 July 2018).

Saili, J., and A.P. Saili, 2018. "At Odds: Perceived Stigma of Single Professional Malay Women". *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Science* 8, no. 14: 79–90.

Samuel, T.K. 2016. *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and The Philippines*. Kuala Lumpur: Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Schmillen, A.D., M.L. Tan, A. Abdur Rahman, S.N.H. Lnu, and N. Weimann Sandig. 2019. *Breaking Barriers: Toward Better Economic Opportunities for Working Women in Malaysia (English)*. Washington, DC: Malaysia Development Experience Series, World Bank Group.

Shahanaaz Habib. 2016. "The Radicalisation of Islam in Malaysia". *Star Online*, 28 August 2016. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/08/28/the-radicalisation-of-islam-in-malaysia-academicians-worry-that-an-exclusivist-way-of-interpretating (accessed 31 October 2019).

Singh, J. 2020. "IS Resilience in Southeast Asia?". *RSIS Commentary 20012*. International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/is-resilience-in-southeast-asia/#.XjaaQWgzY2w (accessed 30 January 2020).

Sisters in Islam. 2019. *Perceptions and Realities: The Public & Personal Rights of Muslim Women in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Sisters in Islam.

Tan, A.T.H. 2019. "Terrorism in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore: Challenge and Response". In *Terrorism and Insurgency in Asia: A Contemporary Examination of Terrorist and Separatist Movements*, edited by B. Schreer and A.T.H. Tan. Oxon: Routledge.

Von Knop, K. 2007. "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 5: 397–414.

Winterbotham, E., and E. Pearson. 2016. "Different Cities, Shared Stories'. *The RUSI Journal* 161, no. 5: 54–65.

Wong Chun Wai. 2016. "Stop Trying to Be Like Arabs, Ruler Advises Malays". *Star Online*, 24 March 2016. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/03/24/stop-trying-to-be-like-arabs-ruler-advises-malays (accessed 28 May 2019).

Zuraini Jamil@Osman. 2015. "Managing the Domestic Sphere: The Experiences of Malay Women in Dual-career Families". *Proceedings of the International Conference on Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences (ICSHSS'15)*, 29–30 July 2015, Phuket, Thailand.