Trust in Polarised Plural Societies: Intersections Across the Ideological Divides of Women's Groups in Malaysia

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the
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by
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Abstract

From Europe to North America to Asia, social groups align with political parties along polarising stances to battle over a range of hot-button culture war issues related to gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, national identity, and religion in the political sphere. Differences are typically about moral authority, beliefs and values that perceived by both sides of a cultural divide to be irreconcilable and rooted in non-intersecting spheres of the sacred and the secular. Such divides erode social trust. This thesis contributes insights to a neglected research area on the question of trust building between women's groups as means to mitigate polarisation. Specifically, the thesis examines trust and Malay women's groups of differing ideological orientations (secular multiracial feminism, Islamic feminism, Islamic revivalism) in Malaysia. One contributing factor to polarisation in Malaysia is the emotive trope of a secular-versus-religious clash over issues involving Islamic law, women, and gender, which is reinforced through ethnic politics, civil society activism, and media frames. Malay women's groups have in the recent past adopted oppositional stances that contributed to polarising public contention. The thesis interrogates the prospects for different Malay women's groups to build trust and form cross cutting feminist solidarity despite their ideological differences and history of being on oppositional sides.

A decolonial feminist standpoint epistemological and methodological research approach is developed from feminist standpoint and decolonial theories to critically study the perspectives of Malay women from Helwa ABIM, Wanita IKRAM, SIS, and ARROW, KRYSS Network, Dear Her and Malaysian Youth for Education Reform. The research uses in-depth qualitative interviews with nineteen Malay women. The research finds that tensions over religious authority are barriers to building trust between the women's groups. However, the research also finds evidence of inter-group engagements and recent instances of social learning between Malay women. Contrary to expectations, several younger women from the Islamic revivalist groups saw no contradiction in identifying as "Muslims" and "feminists", sharing remarkably similar perspectives with the younger women from secular groups. Some of the women from Islamic revivalist groups adopt similar stances with secular and Islamic feminists on controversial issues like teenage pregnancies, sex education and contraception, and early marriage. It is argued that the women's personal experiences in dealing with diversity and navigating complex situations during their advocacy work entails making pragmatic choices rationalised in religious terms, which makes them reflective and more willing to set aside prejudiced beliefs about other women's groups. The women also share remarkably similar experiences of resistance to sexist oppression, labelling, and polarised politics. It is argued that relations of trust between the women that are built upon these shared experiences can function as a necessary precursor to cooperation and compromise in other areas that are more complicated.

Declaration

I wrote a single-authored journal article for the purpose of inclusion in this thesis, and it was peer-reviewed and published in *Religion, State & Society* in 2021. This journal article is included as part of one chapter in this thesis, in accordance with the University of Liverpool's guidelines on the incorporation of published material within a thesis. According to my publishing agreement with *Religion, State & Society*, I hold the right to include the article in this thesis.

Dedication

To my grandmother Jameela Beevi

and

In loving memory of Sheba

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First and foremost, I am grateful to God for sustaining me through one of the most challenging periods in my life with countless blessings and mercies, without which the completion of this thesis would not have been possible. It is an arduous task to conduct research for a PhD thesis under normal circumstances. I conducted my research under unprecedented circumstances, at the height of the Covid-19 global pandemic during which several personal life-changing events also unexpectedly occurred. It was a struggle to stay committed to my research and teaching responsibilities while dealing with the numerous challenges during those difficult times. It is by the will of God that I have managed.

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Glossary of Commonly Used Terms in Thesis

Adat: Malay customary practices

Bumiputera: Indigenous peoples

Dakwah: proselytization by Islamic revivalist groups

Darar: Islamic principle of preventing harms

Fatwa: Islamic legal opinion that can become gazetted as an Islamic law in the Malaysian context

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Fitrah: Islamic theological concept denoting the innate and natural inclinations of human beings

Hadith: the collected traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, based on his sayings and actions

Halaqah: small religious study groups

Hudud: harsh punishments such as flogging, amputation, and death for religious crimes

Ijtihad: independent legal reasoning

Kadi: Syariah judges

Kaum Muda: Malay "young" reformist group

Kaum Tua: Malay "old" traditionalist group

Ketuanan Melayu: Malay dominance

Khitan anak perempuan: female circumcision

Maqasid-shariah: higher objectives of Islamic principles

Mufti: chief Islamic scholar

Pondoks: Islamic schools in Malay villages

Qiwāmah: Islamic theological concept on the right and duty of the husband to hold authority over his wife in the household

Reformasi: pro-democracy Reform movement in Malaysia

Shura: consultation

Syariah: literal meaning in Arabic is the correct path; in the Malaysian context, the term refers to the Islamic legal system.

Taklid buta: blind adherence to religious teaching

Tudung: Malay word for headscarf

Ulama: Islamic scholars

Ummatan wasatan: middle way / moderate Muslim community

Ustaz: religious teachers

Wali: male guardianship

Wilāyah: Islamic theological concept on the right and duty of male family members to exercise guardianship over female members

Zina: sex outside of marriage considered a sin in Islam

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1: Polarisation in Plural Societies

From Europe to North America to Asia, social groups align with political parties along oppositional stances to battle over a range of hot-button cultural issues related to gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, national identity, and religion in the political sphere. These intense battles between groups within the same society have been termed "culture wars", which the American sociologist James Hunter defined as public contention based on the perception that other social groups hold incompatible and objectionable worldviews from one's own social group (Hunter 1991). There are two distinctive types of polarisations – ideological polarisation is the differences in political opinions, beliefs, attitudes and stances between political opponents and affective polarisation is the salience of identity within groups (including political groups) that exacerbates feelings of animosity toward those outside of one's own group (Kubin and Sikorsi 2021). In secular contexts like the United States, ideological polarisation at the elite level between political parties has markedly increased since the 1970s (Hetherington 2009) and constitute the key dividing line between political liberals and conservatives. However, religion has also become a "potent political force" that adds another pertinent dividing line between the faithful and the secular (Hetherington 2009, p. 414). Polarising culture wars in different plural societies around the world today are arguably fuelled at varying degrees by differences over both political and religious ideologies.

Religion as a political force in secular contexts, as in non-secular contexts, tend to exacerbate culture wars because some differences are viewed as non-negotiable. On one side of the divide, some religious groups hold the position that the good and moral life is derived from "an external, definable, and transcendent authority" while on the other side, some secular groups insist that improving the human condition necessitates re-symbolising "historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" (Hunter 1991, p. 44-45). In other words, the worldview of religious-oriented groups centre God and religious doctrine as the ultimate moral authority on right and wrong while the worldview of secular-oriented groups rely on changing attitudes in contemporary society to dismantle what they believe to be discriminatory social and political structures for a more just and fair society. Since the

differences are fundamentally about perceptions of moral authority, beliefs and values that are perceived by both sides of the divide to be irreconcilable, the war becomes a zero-sum game – there can be only one winner. It is a war because groups on both sides of the polarising divide perceive that they are under attack for their respective moral values and beliefs, which are rooted in ostensibly non-intersecting spheres of the sacred and the secular.

These seemingly intractable culture wars are not a new phenomenon. For example, polarising culture wars on abortion and same-sex marriage rights that had characterised public contention in the United States for decades functioned as a "proxy for the conflict between the sacred and the secular" (Hunter 2009, p. 1307). These culture wars that begin in one society have the potential to reverberate beyond national borders to non-secularised plural societies too. Massad argues that in more recent times, the gay movement's push to universalise gay rights based on American human rights discourse led to the proliferation of international organisations dominated by Western males focused on defending the rights of Muslim homosexuals in purportedly 'repressive' Arab societies (2002). The gay movement's attempt to universalise gay rights, he argues, entailed a missionary zeal that was reminiscent of the secular feminist movement's attempt to universalise feminist principles rooted in the experiences of white middle class women for women's movements in the non-Western world, both of which triggered new polarising divides in non-secularised societies far removed from the origins of these movements (Massad 2002).

What is new and deeply troubling today is the ease and speed at which polarising contention grips the public consciousness in most societies. Polarising culture wars today are magnified by the commercialisation of mass media that incentivises media companies to sensationalise news stories on hot-button issues for a larger viewership, often framing highly complex issues such as gender dysphoria and transgender rights in simplistic and polarising terms (Scovel et al 2022). Polarisation is also magnified by the ubiquity of social media use and its popularity-based algorithms that tailor content to maximise user engagement, which results in the formation of echo chambers where groups of people are exposed to only one perspective (Cinelli et al 2020). Populist politicians looking to garner popular support then latch onto the brewing social discontent while advocacy groups with their special interests seek political solutions to the issues that trouble them, with the consequence that some cultural issues become politicised. Different social groups identify with those politicians and / or political parties claiming to be aligned with their ideological worldviews. For example, white evangelical

Christian nationalists in the United States overwhelmingly support Trump for his racialised views on a host of policy matters from immigration to trade protectionism, in what is a reactionary and secularised version of white Christian religious nationalism (Gorski 2019; Yukich 2022). These ideologically rooted social group identities then fuel affective polarisation in politics, that is, the feelings of distrust and dislike of politicians and supporters from other political parties (Iyengar et al 2012; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016).

In the secular contexts of Europe and North America where current culture wars about critical race theory and transgender rights evoke strong emotive reactions, political 'tribal-like' identities are more salient than religious identities (The Economist 2022).[1] However, scholars have noted that these polarising political identities take on some of the characteristics of polarising religious social identities that are relevant in non-secularised contexts with an institutionalised religious system such as in many Muslim-majority countries – the tendency to view other groups as essentially different; the tendency to distrust other groups; and the tendency to view oppositional groups as morally wrong (Finkel et al 2020) – that is, all the fervour of religious sectarianism in politics but without the religious sects. These characteristics act as barriers to social trust between different ideological groups in society, with grave implications for the social cohesion and the smooth functioning of a country. More importantly, the focus on polarising culture wars distracts critical attention away from addressing the looming problems of our times such as social inequalities, the climate crisis and food and economic insecurities. The question of what could possibly help mitigate polarisation between social groups then has profound implications for plural societies in both secular and non-secular contexts struggling with the issue of anti-pluralism stoked by culture wars.

This thesis aims to contribute to research knowledge on mitigating polarisation. Specifically, it focuses on the question of building the relations of trust between ideologically different groups as means to help mitigate polarisation. Malaysia, which is the focus of this thesis, faces the problem of polarising culture wars around the role of Islam in society and in governance, which has pushed different social and political groups into oppositional and distrustful stances. Malaysia also has an institutionalised Islamic system that governs matters related to Islam and the religious affairs of Muslims in the country. One contributing factor to polarisation in

[1] For example, even the Christian right in the United States shifted to rhetorically use secular and liberal justifications in pushing for socially conservative rights and policies (Lewis 2019). Secular conservatives and religious conservatives can be aligned in pushing for socially conservative policies, driving affective polarisation.

Malaysia is the repeated emotive trope of a secular-versus-religious clash that is reinforced through ethnic politics, civil society activism, and media frames, especially when contentious issues involving Islamic law, often related to women and gender, capture public attention. Hunter argues that polarising contention in the culture wars primarily arise from elites who play an important role in framing the public discourse on these hot-button issues (Hunter and Wolfe 2006). The elites include politicians, religious leaders, and civil society groups. This thesis focuses on Malay women's civil society groups of differing ideological orientations – secular multiracial feminist, Islamic feminist, and Islamic revivalist groups. As elite actors, these Malay women's advocacy groups, located primarily in the urban areas of Malaysia, contribute to public discourse on women's rights and gender (Stivens 2017), which are topics that are often at the heart of culture wars in Malaysia. As active and vocal members in numerous Malay women's advocacy groups of different ideological orientations, Malay women have in the recent past contributed to polarising public contention over women's rights and gender, which has reinforced societal perceptions of non-intersecting spheres of the sacred and the secular. In this context of polarising ethnic politics, Islam and culture wars, the thesis interrogates the prospects for Malay women's groups of differing ideological orientations to build trust and form cross cutting feminist solidarity despite knowledge of their ideological differences and a history of being on oppositional sides.

The first section of this introductory chapter provides a brief contextual background to ethnic politics and religious nationalism that function as key contributing factors to polarisation in Malaysia. The second section discusses the theoretical concept of trust in relation to the problem of declining trust between ideological groups in polarised plural societies. The third section discusses the research focus and questions addressed in this thesis and summarises the main contributions of the thesis. The fourth section defines the key terminologies used in this thesis. This introductory chapter ends with an outline of the remaining chapters in the thesis.

1.2: Polarisation in Malaysia

Ethnic Politics

A key element contributing to polarisation in Malaysia is the entrenchment of toxic ethnic politics. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country in Southeast Asia.

Approximately 58% of the population are ethnic Malays, with a significant ethnic minority population comprised of ethnic Chinese at 23%, ethnic Indian at 6.6%, and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) and the Orang Asli (aboriginal groups) in Peninsular Malaysia at 12% of the population.[2] Malaysia's ethnically plural society is in part an outcome of Chinese and Indian labour migration into British colonial Malaya between 1870 and 1930 to meet the needs of capitalist production in the country during colonial rule. Malaysian society and politics today are shaped by the legacies of colonial racial categories, and by unequal race-based postcolonial policies and practices that became institutionalised at foundational points in the development of the Malaysian state. The result is a prevailing essentialised colonial-inspired worldview of ethnic group difference that is forwarded by Malaysia's political elites – that is, the notion that racial and religious differences are primordial, intrinsic, and fixed, and yet potentially unstable and divisive in ethnically plural societies like Malaysia (Hirschman 1986).

The Indigenous peoples who historically lived and moved between geographical regions in the "Malay world" – regions that today encompasses parts of "Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, the central east-coast parts of Sumatra, and much of coastal northern, western and southern Borneo, Brunei, parts of Malaysian Sarawak, and parts of Indonesian Kalimantan" – did not see themselves as part of a bounded community of Malays (Milner 2008, p. 5). Instead, the idea of Malay as a distinctive racial group was socially constructed during British colonial rule as the colonisers brought with them "their classification of humankind by 'race'" (Milner 2008, p. 16). The Malays developed a sense of group identity as the influx of migrant labourers from China and India fuelled anxieties about their own economic prospects and heightened group distinctions in society (Khoo 2011). The colonisers had permitted enterprising Chinese merchants to set up businesses, including in the profitable tin mining industry, using migrant Chinese labour rather than Malay labour while Indian migrant labourers worked in services and in the plantations (Khoo 2011). Through the sorting of the different ethnic groups to specialised occupations, the British colonisers created racial and class distinctions between the Indigenous peoples and the migrant Chinese and Indian groups (Hirschman 1986). These developments during British colonialism fostered a growing sense of marginalisation among the Malays, who began to see themselves as a bounded racial community (Musa 2010).

[2] Malaysian Department of Statistics. Available at: https://dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/8c705dac-ef05-11ed-96d5-1866daa77ef9 (last accessed 18 May 2022).

This racial categorisation of the diverse peoples of Malaya has proved remarkably stable as it has been carried into postcolonial Malaysia. Going into the negotiations for an independent Malaysia with the British, the Malays constituted slightly less than half of the population and were concerned that they would soon be outnumbered by the Chinese and Indians (Stilt 2015). The Malay political elites pushed for and ensured that the new constitution recognised the "special position" of the Malays as indigenous to the land, the Malay rulers as heads of Islam, Malay as the sole official language, and Islam as the state religion (Stilt 2015). The constitution further reserved positions in the civil service, public scholarships, and special quotas in education for the Malays. These special rights were later extended to the Indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak when the two states joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963. The clauses were agreed to by the non-Malay ethnic minority political elites in exchange for citizenship rights. The Malay political elites also emphasised the Muslim aspect of their group identity because it had the added benefit of limiting the power of non-Malays in the new configuration for an independent postcolonial Malaysia where Malays were politically dominant (Hefner 2001). The colloquial understanding of Malay political dominance (*ketuanan Melayu*) entailed a social compact between the three main ethnic groups wherein the Malays were understood to be the rightful indigenous ethnic group holding political power in accordance with its constitutionally mandated "special position". While the Malay political elites held power in newly independent Malaysia, most Malays were still economically disadvantaged compared to the Chinese. After an outbreak of violence between the Malays and Chinese in 1969 – which the Malay ruling elites attributed to Malay anger over lack of progress on alleviating poverty – an affirmative action policy, the New Economic Policy (NEP), was implemented to actualise the constitutional provisions on special rights, which was intended to help increase Malay participation in the Malaysian economy, build a Malay middle class, and reduce poverty. As race became a governmental criterion for the allocation of scarce resources, the NEP was responsible for heightening racial distinctions between Malay and non-Malay citizens (Peletz 2005).

Subsequently, to stay politically relevant and to continue to win Malay votes, Malay ruling elites conflated the notion of *ketuanan Melayu* with Malay special rights by positioning themselves as defenders of Indigenous citizens' rights. The notion of *ketuanan Melayu* and the continued implementation of pro-Malay affirmative action policies that are linked to racial categories effectively racialises the Chinese and Indians minorities in Malaysia as immigrant cultural outsiders in contrast with Malays, who are upheld by the state and its ultra-Malay

nationalist supporters in civil society as Indigenous cultural insiders (Gabriel 2021). Therefore, even though the state periodically attempts to promote multiculturalism to temper inter-ethnic tensions, its discourse is predicated on "togetherness-in-apartness" where ethnic groups are still seen as separate entities that are "untouched and unaltered by one another's difference" (Gabriel 2021, p. 626). Over time, the continuation of unequal race-based policies contributed to frustrations among the non-Malay minorities. Today, a growing segment of reform-minded Malay politicians and their supporters work with ethnic minority politicians to push for governmental reforms. As Chapter Five later details, Malay politicians who defend the *ketuanan Melayu* status quo pejoratively label their Malay reform-minded political rivals as 'liberal' Muslims who are in cahoots with non-Malays to undermine the position of Malays and Islam in Malaysia. These developments create the conditions for intra-Malay contestations that today characterise polarising politics and culture wars in Malaysia, which Malay women activists must navigate.

Religious Nationalism

The second key element of polarisation in Malaysia is religious nationalism – that is, the politicisation of Islam and the close association of Islam with the state and national identity. Approximately two-thirds of the population in Malaysia today is Muslim (Malaysia Census 2020). During the 1970s and 1980s, numerous Islamic revivalist *dakwah* (proselytization) civil society groups emerged that focused on educating Malays to inculcate Islamic values as a mean of social and political empowerment (Martinez 2001). These Islamic revivalist groups pushed for more Islamic influence in governance. The Malay-led government responded with pro-Islamisation policies that strengthened the Islamic bureaucracy at the national level that deals with Islamic matters (Abu-Bakar 1981). Hence, the progressive Islamisation in Malaysia proceeded "both from a top-down approach of the Malaysian state and from a bottom-up approach of social forces" through Islamic civil society groups (Saleem 2018, p. 314). Barr and Govindasamy argue that Islamisation in Malaysia occurred over three main stages: (1) the first stage entailed reforming the outward aspects of religious identity such as Muslim dietary and dress practices so public spaces were more visibly Muslim (2) the second stage involved establishing and expanding Islamic institutions that included schools, banks, centres and mosques (3) the third stage involved the expansion of the capacity and the jurisdiction of the

Syariah (Islamic law) courts.[3] By the third stage, the non-Muslim minorities in Malaysia perceived these developments as "oppressive" particularly in instances when some local state governments began "limiting non-Muslim places of worship by refusing building permits and land allocations and pro-actively destroying non-Muslims' worshipping sites" (Barr and Govindasamy 2010, p. 297-298).

During the 2000s, there was a particularly polarising period in Malaysia where high profile religious freedom battles were fought in the civil courts. These cases often involved a marriage between two non-Muslim individuals breaking down with one spouse, usually a male convert to Islam, seeking custody of the children in the Syariah courts where the non-Muslim mother lacks legal standing. Another type of case exemplified by the highly publicised Lina Joy case[4] is when a Malay seeks to officially leave Islam through the civil courts after being refused by state bureaucracies and the Syariah courts (see Kortteinen 2008). According to the Malaysian Federal Constitution, a Malay is defined as one who "professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, (and) conforms to Malay custom" (Siddique 1981, p. 77). Thus, permitting Malays to leave Islam has profound implications for the entrenched race-based political system in which Malay dominance currently prevails. These developments have resulted in a reactive dynamic – those who are affected by Islamisation and the expansion of Islamic law (for e.g., ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and women) reject and resist Islamic influence in governance and in the public sphere by turning to secular justifications for reforms while those who wish to uphold Islamic values in governance push back (Daniels 2017; Moustafa 2018).

The religious freedom cases were hyped up by the media and civil society groups, with Malay women activists, along with their male counterparts, adopting opposing stances based on their group's ideological orientations – secular-oriented groups that relied on human rights discourse asserted that individual rights guaranteed under the Malaysian constitutional were under serious threat while Islamic-oriented groups claimed their community rights to govern their own religious communities were similarly under serious threat (Moustafa 2018). Such

[3] The governance of Syariah law falls under state jurisdiction so there are 14 different court systems (13 for each state and one for the Federal Territories), each tasked with the responsibility to interpret and apply Islamic law in their jurisdictions. The Syariah courts adjudicate matters related to Muslim personal and family law, religious practices, and offenses against Islam (Shuaib 2012).

[4] Lina Joy, who was legally categorised as a Malay and a Muslim, sought to leave Islam and convert to Christianity in order to marry her Indian Christian male partner (Moustafa 2018).

instances of different worldviews clashing in the public sphere where Malay women activists and their male counterparts use seemingly exclusive expressions – the language of universal individual human rights versus the language of communitarian Islamic rights – to defend and forward their respective positions contribute to the mainstream Malaysian perception that the boundaries between the secular and the sacred worldviews are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, media frames that sensationalise these clashes contribute to magnified non-Muslim fears over Muslim intolerance, extremism, and threats to freedom and fundamental liberties (Nor and Gale 2021), which reinforce the perception that secular and Islamic groups are unable to find a common ground.

Malay Women's Groups and Polarised Politics

Given this context, the Malay women activists have perceived each other as belonging to two opposing sides on matters involving Islam, women's rights, and gender. The secular-oriented groups[5] regard Malay women from the Islamic groups as "defenders of patriarchal virtues such as the glorification of motherhood, domesticated lifestyles and polygyny" (Ng, Mohamad, and Tan 2006, p. 37) while the Islamic groups regard Malay women from the secular and Islamic feminist groups as feminists that are "'too free' and '(too) Western', if not 'westoxified'" (Stivens 2017, p. 276). The clashes around the religious freedom cases in recent history, framed by politicians, litigants, and civil society activists as secular-versus-religious in the public sphere, problematically pre-supposes an inevitable conflict between ideologically different groups centred on perceptions of inherently different worldviews. This presupposition negates the possibilities of consensus building and cooperation through increased levels of understanding, trust, and social learning between different ideological groups.

1.3: Theoretical Concept of Trust: The Problem of Declining Trust

As a theoretical concept, trust has been conceptualised and studied extensively across multiple disciplinary fields including in the field of sociology (Van Lange et al 2017). This section focuses on five conceptual understandings of trust that is most relevant for this thesis' interrogation of the prospects for Malay women's groups of differing ideological orientations

[5] Islamic feminist groups are generally perceived by Malaysians to hold similar viewpoints as secular feminist groups because they reference human rights discourse in their advocacy (see ensuing discussion in Chapters Two and Six).

to build relations of trust and form cross cutting feminist solidarity, namely generalised (or social) trust, personalised trust, particularised trust, political trust, and moralistic trust. Although trust has been defined in various ways, one central understanding of the concept is that trust entails an expectation of future behaviours of the other group and allows for a readiness to take risks in relation to the other group (Govier 1997; Bar-Tal and Alon 2016; Van Lange et al 2017). Trust is essentially "an attitude" that is based on specific "beliefs and feelings" (Govier 1997, p. 4). Trusting attitudes between people is essential for a country's social cohesion and stability and it is correlated with good governance, development, and economic growth (Putnam 1993; Fukuyama 1995; Govier 1997; Newton et al 2018). Trust is also valuable because it promotes cooperation in society and the cooperation itself fosters more trust (Putnam 2000). Trust is theorised as one of three ingredients (the other two being knowledge and morality) for resolving social problems in situations where people stand to gain collective benefits through cooperation but fail to do so due to the conflictual self-interests of individuals (Dawes 1980 cited in Van Lange et al 2017). In the Malaysian context, social perceptions of inherently different worldviews and conflicting self-interests of the ideological (secular and religious) groups are magnified and reinforced through ethnic politics, civil society activism, religious nationalism, and sensationalised media frames. In this context, culture war clashes on topics that intersect Islamic law, women's rights, and gender then creates fertile conditions for a decline in trust levels in society.

Generalised trust is defined as trust in unknown people, that is, trust in those people whom we do not have information about their trustworthiness (Herreros 2004). Generalised trust is most pertinent in urban societies where contact between people of different social backgrounds can often be frequent but fleeting (Newton et al 2018). Based on findings from a comparative study of communities in Southern Italy and Northern Italy, Putnam theorised that communities with higher levels of generalised trust tend to be more willing to participate in civic associations, which in turn helps those communities develop more efficient government and prosper economically (1993). In other words, generalised trust fosters civic participation, with beneficial effects for wider society. Conversely, declining levels of generalised trust becomes problematic because people are less willing to engage in civic participation, with negative impacts on development and economic growth, and governmental efficiency (Putnam 1993). Research on other country contexts has shown that ethnic diversity and polarised group beliefs and attitudes can reduce generalised trust levels not only between different ethnic groups but also between the members of the same group due to a diminished capacity to form cross cutting

forms of social solidarity (Putnam 2007; Çelik, Bilali and Iqbal 2017). In his work on the US context, Putnam argues that in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, people tend to "hunker down", that is, stick to themselves, which has an overall effect of weakening the formal and informal networks in society that are necessary for building relations of trust (Putnam 2007). Putnam's argument about the negative effects of ethnic diversity does not bode well for plural societies that have to deal with social and economic changes, immigration, and ethnic and religious conflicts (Newton et al 2018). Culture wars and polarising politics can further diminish trust levels in a plural society when different ideological and political groups perceive that they are under attack by other groups for their moral values and beliefs. Under such conditions, Lee finds that ideological and political groups are more inclined to distrust those different from themselves and they are less inclined to want to compromise on difficult issues (2022).

On the other hand, personalised trust – defined as trust in those whom you know personally (for example, family and friends) – is present in most societies, even in plural societies with low generalised trust (Newton et al 2018). However, personalised trust is not a substitute for generalised trust because trusting only those you know personally does not foster the forms of social networks that can yield societal benefits such as development and economic growth, social cohesion, and good governance (Govier 1997). In her work, Govier highlights a study on poor communities in Southern Italy which revealed that a culture of lying was prevalent there because people held negative beliefs about others; they believed that "if you told other people the truth, they might use that knowledge against you" (1997, p. 139). Govier theorised that such negative beliefs about others are particularly rife in contexts with scarce resources and economic insecurities because people are inclined to believe that fierce competition is necessary to survive (1997). The negative belief about others contributes to a reinforcing vicious cycle wherein feelings of distrust are rationalised by negative beliefs that promote the lying behaviour which in turn increases feelings of distrust because others in that same context tend to lie too (Govier 1997).

In the Malaysian context, the negative beliefs and distrust between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups during the early years of independence were fostered by economic insecurities and perceptions of scarce resources. Amid contentious politicking between political elites, the social distrust between the ethnic groups ultimately contributed to an outbreak of inter-ethnic violence in 1969. The subsequent adoption of pro-Malay affirmative policies that were meant

to alleviate Malay poverty also promoted the growth of patronage networks between the political establishment and the Malay business class, as well as political clientelism (Gomez and Sundaram 1999). Govier notes that such patronage networks and clientelist relationships are conducive for the development of particularised trust (1997). In this context, the patron (for example, a political elite) extends special favours and protections to the client (an individual citizen) in exchange for the client's political support. Govier characterises the patron-client relationship as one between "a relatively vulnerable and low-status member of society" and "someone of higher status, more wealth, and greater power" (1997, p. 147). If the patron is reliable and treats the client well, the client extends trust to the patron based on personal ties and obligations, much akin to the personalised trust extended to family and friends (Govier 1997). This form of trust is particularised though because it is dependent on the history of particular individuals and their interactions – that is, the trust is extended to patrons as individuals and not generalised to their roles or institutions in society (Govier 1997). In other words, the particularised trust does not extend to the political party, political system, or institutions, even though the patron is part of that party or system or institution. Clientelism – that is, the transfer of material goods and services to the poor or marginalised groups by the government or political parties in exchange for political support – also generates this form of particularised trust on a larger scale.

Another related form of particularised trust is between those who share the same characteristics and identities such as ethnicity or religion; in other words, trusting people who are like yourself (Uslaner and Conley 2003). Particularised trust tends to promote in-group and out-group dynamics, which are not conducive to the formation of social connections between different social groups. Uslaner and Conley theorised that "people with strong ethnic identifications and who associate primarily with their own kind will withdraw from civic participation or will belong to organizations made up of their own [kind]" (2003, p. 331). In the Malaysian context, the ideological differences (and not only ethnicity or religion) between Malay groups also creates in-group and out-group dynamics that foster this form of particularised trust. For example, the Malay women's groups in Malaysia are differentiated by their ideological worldviews even though the Malay women activists share the same ethnicity and religion. As Chapters Two and Six later show, the different ways in which the Malay women interpret religious doctrine and their attitudes to established religious authority vested in the Syariah legal system determines the boundaries of their distinctive ideological groups. It is their shared ideological worldviews that enable the women to more easily trust their fellow group members

and be more suspicious of outsiders. The women activists are particularised trusters, that is, they more easily trust those from the same group as themselves, even if they do not know others from their group personally (Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994; Uslaner 2002). Conversely, some of the women activists tend to distrust women from other groups because of negative perceptions about the other groups' moral values and beliefs. The problem with distrust is that social beliefs "tend to confirm themselves and work to create a social reality that confirms them" (Govier 1997, p. 37). In other words, one's beliefs about others affects one's perception of reality, with the risk of becoming self-fulfilling – therefore, "distrust in others will tend to produce untrustworthy others" (Govier 1997, p. 37).

In Abascal and Baldassari's refutation of Putnam's argument that generalised trust diminishes in diverse societies, they demonstrate that distrust of others in contemporary diverse societies stem more from prejudicial views and inequalities rather than the heterogenous nature of those societies (Abascal and Baldassari 2015). This finding is more promising because one can develop ways to change prejudicial views and reduce inequalities. In an earlier work, Putnam argued that one way to improve trust would be to encourage participation in voluntary associations that bridge the different social cleavages such as ethnicity, religion, and culture so that people who would otherwise be inclined to distrust each other have opportunities to interact and build trust (Putnam 2000). The basis for trust and cooperation between people in these heterogenous associations lie in how people's different characteristics are networked in a functional way so that people recognise how their roles connect to a larger common good (Putnam 2000). The difficulty of this in practice is that most voluntary associations tend to be homogenous groups, meaning participants in these groups tend to interact with others who are mostly like themselves (Zmerli and Newton 2007). This tendency for people to self-sort into homogenous groups based on ethnicity, religion or ideology fosters particularised trust with those like themselves rather than generalised social trust in those different from themselves (Yamagishi 1994). Furthermore, participation in advocacy groups revolve around a set of beliefs to forward a social cause or policy reforms, and prejudicial beliefs about other groups serve to foster stronger in-group bonds. Those individuals who self-identify with a group develop shared beliefs and views of the world, i.e., the social knowledge that is transmitted and maintained through social interactions cultivates the sense of belonging to an in-group (Mannheim 1952; Turner et al 1987). In order to mitigate polarisation, the different groups would need to overcome prejudicial beliefs about other groups to build relations of trust, which

is much harder to achieve in a context where the differences are known and perceived by the groups to be non-negotiable.

A decline in political trust can also reduce generalised trust in society and enhance particularised trust within identity groups, which promotes in-group and out-group dynamics. Political trust – defined as trust in political institutions and governmental organisations such as parliaments, courts, police force, and political parties – can contribute to generalised trust in democratic society (Warren 2018). Warren theorised three main ways in which democracies can build and support generalised trust in society – one, democracies help to mitigate the risks of trusting unknown people in society because institutionalised systems in democracies enforce security and the rule of law, so wrongs can be more easily prevented or righted; two, dependency relationships such as those prevalent in patronage and clientelist networks are reduced through universal welfare supports; three, there is an increased likelihood for shared norms to spread through institutions, such as public schools and universities that cut across particularistic ties (2018). Warren argues that particularised trust is not necessarily antithetical to political democracies, but people who are particularised trusters tend to regard the pursuit of interests as zero sum, that is one person's win is another's loss (2018). As such, particularised trust without adequate levels of generalised trust in society can be "fertile grounds for ethnic, racial, and religious factionalism, clientelistic protection, and corruption" (Warren 2018, p. 85). The polarising culture wars around the role of Islam in society and government in Malaysia that are implicated in toxic ethnic politics and religious nationalism have pushed different social and political groups into oppositional and distrustful stances, which weakens political trust in institutions. As this thesis later elaborates, political machinations that forced frequent changes of government over the last five years in Malaysia have promoted a general distrust in politicians and political parties. Yet as Chapter Six later shows, the women's groups in this thesis differentially trust specific institutions such as the Syariah court system, which has the effect of enhancing particularised trust within their own groups. Compared to the women from the Islamic feminist and secular multiracial groups, the women from the Islamic revivalist groups have more trust in the established religious institutions because they share and value the same ideological beliefs as religious bureaucrats over the Syariah system's role in positioning Islam's centrality in Malaysian society and government.

Fostering generalised trust in Malaysia can be challenging under the conditions of toxic ethnic politics and religious nationalism, which tend to enhance particularised trust and in-group and

out-group dynamics between the different social groups. However, opportunities for trust building in plural and divided societies like Malaysia are possible when viewed through Durkheim's idea of organic solidarity where a society is "characterized by complex interdependencies, complementarity, and individualization" (Abascal and Baldassari 2015, p. 724). When people can recognise that their own group's well-being and fate is connected to the well-being and fate of others in society in a complex and interdependent social system, they are more inclined to participate in civic engagement and cooperation (Uslaner 2002). Uslaner conceptualises moralistic trust as trust that is underpinned by an optimistic belief that others share the same moral values as yourself. Those who hold moralistic trust are more willing to consider others, even those who may not carry the same ideological beliefs or policy opinions as themselves, as part of a shared wider community (Uslaner 2002). Uslaner's conceptualisation of moralistic trust is more similar to generalised trust than particularised trust in that one is prepared to take the risk to trust unknown people. However, Uslaner's moralistic trust goes deeper than generalised trust because those with moralistic trust hold on to the belief that the other groups will not let them down because they share moral values as members of a wider community. Moralistic trust then can help to promote civic engagement because of the belief that one's own fate is connected to the fate of others in the wider community (Uslaner 2002).

1.4: Research Focus, Questions and Contributions

It may be counter-intuitive to imagine that different ideological groups with their particular set of moral values and beliefs, which have contributed to polarising public contention, can develop some form of cross-cutting moralistic trust. However, it may be possible that women activists from different ideological groups may be able to develop a sense of solidarity through their shared struggles as females navigating patriarchal social structures. There is some evidence in Muslim majority societies that the conditions of polarising political contention have created opportunities for an increase in inter-group interactions that have contributed to developments that foster impactful social change in unexpected ways. Ethnographic research in Morocco show how reformist challenges by secular feminists on gender equality was an impetus for Islamist women activists to take on leadership roles within the previously male-dominated Islamic movement (Salime 2011). Even though the Moroccan Islamist women activists sought to challenge feminist conceptions of gender equality, they nonetheless

interpreted, integrated, and modified feminist perspectives in ways that created the conditions for change within their own Islamist groups – for example, the recognition and acceptance by some males of the importance of female leadership in Islamist groups to effectively counter reformist challenges by secular-oriented feminists (Salime 2011). More recently, the active participation of Islamist women activists in the Arab Spring protests brought the world's attention to the "desire for and an accomplishment of expanded women's roles within Islam" by Islamist women in Middle Eastern and North African societies (el-Husseini 2016, p. 60). Although the Islamist women in these societies reject secular feminism and even the concept of Islamic feminism, they have nevertheless positioned themselves to make practical advances in gender equality that have opened more avenues for women's political participation (el-Husseini 2016). In the Malaysian context, political struggles between Malay political elites and the opposition political coalition of secular multiracial, Malay, and Islamist parties had created reasons for Malay women activists from secular and Islamic women's groups to pragmatically work together to support the opposition coalition's cause on governmental reforms. Malay women activists from secular and Islamic civil society groups had worked with each other within this context on joint advocacy campaigns on topics of good governance and interfaith relations (Ng, Mohamad, and Tan 2006).

These developments are indicators that some secular feminists and Islamic women activists are moving in the same direction on pragmatic grounds, but we do not know if they perceive each other in less prejudicial and polarising ways. We know much more from academic research and from the media about the polarising differences between women from ideologically different groups – for instance, the recent protests between secular feminists and Islamist women over the Tunisian government's attempt at changing the unequal inheritance laws for Tunisian women, which are grounded in religious interpretations of the Quran (Moghadam 2022). This thesis questions whether there can be potential opportunities from the increased contact between women's groups with different ideologies to reduce prejudicial beliefs and open the door for trust building. This is a worthwhile area to study because as Kramer argues while the barriers to trust are formidable, they are not insurmountable: "the knot of distrust, if not untied completely, can at least be loosened" (Kramer 2004, p. 150).

The thesis' focus on Malay women activists is important because the discourse in the Malaysian public sphere is often dominated by a masculinist perspective (Mohamad 2010a). While women's rights and gender issues tend to spark public interest, responses from male-

dominated institutions such as the state, political parties, religious bureaucracies, and civil society groups often take prominence. Yet women's activism in Malaysia has a long history that spans from the colonial to the postcolonial periods (Lai 2003). Women activists were instrumental in galvanising grassroots support for a variety of causes that ranged from voting in political parties to lobbying for pro-women policies to joining the Islamic revivalist movement (Dancz 1987; Dairiam 1995; Weiss and Hassan 2003; Ng, Mohamad, and Tan 2006). However, women activists' perspectives were generally understudied by researchers. The dominance of the masculinist perspective in the public sphere meant that researchers who studied Malaysian civil society were in fact studying the perspectives of male actors. Some early studies on Malay women studied their responses to social and economic changes (Ong 1987) and women's participation in male-dominated trade unions (Ariffin 1997). In recent years, the perspectives of women activists from secular feminist and Islamic feminist groups in Malaysia have been more studied (some notable recent examples include Moll 2009; Ng, Mohamad, and Tan 2006; Osman and Hirst 2013; Elias 2015a; Basarudin 2016; Lee 2018). However, scholars highlight that there is a notable lack of research into the perspectives of women activists from the mainstream Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups in Malaysia (Mohamad 2004; Lee 2018). A recent masters' dissertation included women from the Islamic revivalist groups in the study of Muslim women activists in Malaysia but only looked at their perspectives on religious orientations (see Alatas 2021). Therefore, very little is known about the perspectives of Islamic women activists on issues implicated in contemporary culture wars, ethnic politics and religious nationalism in Malaysia.

Given that the Malay women hold similar objectives in progressing women's rights, albeit from different ideological positioning, several broad questions come to mind: can the conditions and outcomes of polarising ethnic politics motivate Malay women from the ideologically different groups to be more willing to focus on their commonalities rather than their differences? Are Malay women simply reproducing the polarising secular-versus-religious discourse when it comes to issues at the intersection of Islam, women's rights, and gender? Or could the boundaries of what Malay women think of as the secular and the sacred be shaped and re-shaped through knowledge of other women activists and increased encounters between them? What do increased encounters portend for building the relations of trust between women from the different ideological groups?

Specifically, the thesis aims:

1) to investigate the prospects for a locally rooted feminism in Malaysia that could serve as a basis for uniting the ideologically different women's groups.

2) to consider the possible avenues through which Malay women activists may begin to help mitigate polarisation in Malaysia.

To these aims, the thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

1) How do Malay women activists perceive other women activists from groups that are ideologically different from their own group?

2) In what ways, if any, do knowledge of other Malay women activists' positions on social issues impact one's own understanding?

3) What understandings and/or strategies, if any, do Malay women activists use to foster trust when engaging with women activists from different groups?

4) In what ways are power, ideologies, and social hierarchies implicated in their respective understandings of social issues?

The thesis contributes to original research in three main areas. One, the thesis contributes new empirical insights on Malay women's groups in Malaysia by producing a novel mapping of Malay women's groups along the prevalent ideological orientations in Malaysia and then studying the intersections across the ideological divides of women's groups by centring the perspectives of the women activists. In this way, the thesis contributes to an understudied area in the academic literature on women's activism in Malaysia – that is, it contributes new insights on shared perspectives between women activists from the Islamic revivalist, secular multiracial feminist, and Islamic feminist groups on a variety of issues implicated in contemporary culture war clashes.[6] Furthermore, the thesis contributes important insights into the perspectives,

[6] The groups included in this thesis are as follows: Secular multiracial feminist – Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW); KRYSS Network; Dear Her; Malaysian Youths for Education Reform. Islamic feminist – Sisters in Islam. Islamic revivalist – Helwa ABIM, women's wing of Angkatan Belia Islam

contentions, and narrations of women activists from the Islamic revivalist groups who are often neglected in academic research on women's activism in Malaysia, which fills a gap in the academic literature on women's activism in Malaysia. Two, the thesis expands the theoretical understandings on trust between ideologically different women's groups, and on sectarianisation processes in competitive authoritarian political systems where there are free elections like in Sunni-majority Malaysia. The empirical research shows that the context and conditions of polarisation in Malaysia can provide opportunities for trust building and de-polarisation between different ideological groups. The thesis expands the theoretical understanding on moralistic trust by demonstrating that activists who navigate diversity in a polarised context, can unwittingly move across ideological divides, and in doing so, encounter complex situations that reshape their thinking, enabling them to shed some of the prejudiced perceptions of other groups – this helps to open the door for building relations of trust between different ideological groups. The thesis also expands the theoretical understanding of sectarianisation by demonstrating that political elites can construct novel forms of intra-Muslim divisions in a relatively short span of time in the struggle to maintain power, even in a context where there is a lack of pre-existing theological differences available for easy manipulation by the political elites. Three, the thesis contributes to an epistemic and methodological innovation by establishing the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach to study marginalised groups like the Malay Muslim women's groups in this thesis. These original contributions of the thesis are further elaborated in Chapter Nine.

1.5: Key Terminologies

This section defines key terminologies used in this thesis, namely (1) the distinction the thesis makes between Islamists and Islamic activists, and (2) ideological orientation.

Islamists and Islamic

The terms "Islamism" and "Islamist" have acquired negative connotations in world politics because they have been conflated with the 'Islamic state' narrative from terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Most Islamists though are not violent extremists even as they advocate

Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, ABIM); Wanita IKRAM, women's wing of Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (Organisation of Honour Malaysia, IKRAM). Chapter 2.3 provides detailed information on these groups.

for Islamic influence in state and society (Hamid 2015). As this thesis will argue in the ensuing chapters, the conditions of ethnic politics and religious nationalism in Malaysia exacerbates polarisation along secular and religious lines, which contributes to the distrust towards Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups and Islamist political parties by ethnic minorities and non-mainstream Muslim reformist groups. As Chapters Seven and Eight later show, the women from the Islamic revivalist groups in this thesis do not self-identify as Islamists, even though they are sometimes labelled as such by other women activists. Categorising Islamic activists from the Islamic revivalist groups and political actors from Islamist parties together misses nuanced differences between the two that matter when it comes to examining possible intersections in understandings between the women activists that may not be present with Islamist political actors. In this thesis, the term Islamists is used for politicians from Islamist political parties while the term Islamic activists is used for activists from the Islamic revivalist groups. The term "Islamic women activists" is used to collectively refer to the women from the two Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups in this thesis – Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM.

Ideological Orientation

By ideological orientation, it is meant that the women's groups were shaped by a discernible system of meanings in which there was a pairing of "assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to promoting or resisting social change" (Oliver and Johnston 2000, p. 43). The assertions and theories relate to claims linked to elaborate belief systems (e.g., political, philosophical, or religious beliefs) about how society should work; values relate to moral or ethical understandings about what is right and wrong; and norms relate to standards of behaviour (Oliver and Johnston 2000). Hence, ideology is both normative and generative as a group's system of meanings guides both the personal behaviour of a member in the group and the collective action of the group (Martin 2015). By way of example, the ideological group differentiation based on system of meanings can be seen in the matter of Muslim women dress code. The Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups assert that Muslim women are obligated to wear the *tudung* (headscarf) as a religious duty based on Islamic doctrine. This assertion sets the normative standard and expected behaviour for women activists within the Islamic revivalist groups. In turn, the normative standard is generative because the women activists reproduce the assertion collectively through their choice and action to wear the *tudung*, which sets the standard for incoming (new) women activists to the group. On the other hand, the Islamic feminists assert that Muslim women have the freedom of choice to decide whether

to wear or not wear the *tudung* based on interpretations from specific Quranic verses that Islam do not permit compulsion in religion. While the women activists from Islamic revivalist groups emphasise the value of religious duty, the Islamic feminists emphasise the value of freedom of choice. In the matter of Muslim women dress code then, the *tudung* can be viewed as an outward marker of an ideological differentiation between the activist groups – in relation to the Malay women who participated in the study for this thesis, all the women from the Islamic revivalist groups wore *tudung* while most of the women from the Islamic feminist group did not. The point is the women's groups are ideologically different, in the sense that their respective system of meanings is shaped by different assertions, norms and values on a whole host of matters, even though all the women activists self-identify as Muslims.

1.6: Structure of the Thesis

This thesis includes a published journal article as one chapter in accordance with the "PhD with publications" option offered at the University of Liverpool. The thesis engages with the theoretical literature on trust, sectarianisation theory, and feminist and decolonial theories in the different chapters of the thesis which are highlighted in the outline below.

Chapter Two: Ideological Orientations of Malay Women Groups in Malaysia

The chapter reviews the academic literature on the significant developments and issues in Malay women's activism and their quest for emancipation in Malaysia. As there is a lack of literature on the more contemporary forms of Malay women's activism in Malaysia, the chapter adopts a historical approach in charting the trajectory of Malay women activists' participation in key social movements during the colonial and postcolonial periods of Malaysia. In doing so, the chapter provides an understanding of the historical differentiation of the main ideological orientations of Malay women's groups that today contribute to the national discourse on Islam and Muslim women in Malaysia. The chapter then maps the women's groups that are included in the thesis to analytical categories based on the prevalent ideological orientations, namely secular multiracial feminism; Islamic revivalism; and Islamic feminism.

Chapter Three: A Decolonial Feminist Standpoint Research Approach – Centring Multiple Experiences of Malay Women in Malaysia

The chapter discusses the epistemological and methodological decolonial feminist standpoint research approach that guided the research for this thesis. The chapter details the benefits of integrating feminist standpoint and decolonial theories to analyse the Malay women's perspectives, choices, and actions through a critical lens. In making the case for an integration of the two theories, the chapter also highlights the areas of tension between hegemonic feminist theory and the study of Muslim women that must be accounted for when critically evaluating the standpoints from the Malay women in this research. The chapter develops the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach as an epistemic and methodological innovation that ethically centres new metrics by which the multiplicity of women's standpoints is obtained and critically sorted and assessed.

Chapter Four: Research Methods and Data Analysis

The chapter discusses the research methods and the ethical considerations that were accounted for during the data collection of the perspectives from the Malay women activists. The chapter addresses the challenges of pivoting to online qualitative interviews due to the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that prevented planned face-to-face interviews, and how these challenges were managed. The chapter discusses the benefits of online qualitative interviewing, which were designed to be conservational in style and based on a deliberative democratic approach to interviewing that reflected the decolonial feminist standpoint research praxis discussed in the previous chapter. The chapter also addresses the limitations to the research. The chapter then outlines the process of critical thematic analysis used to code and interpret the qualitative interview data.

Chapter Five: Ethnic Politics and the 'Liberal' Muslim Other in Malaysia

Through an engagement with sectarianisation theory, the chapter discusses the conditions that facilitated the ruling elites' construction of the 'liberal' Muslim Other category as a divisive sectarianising tool for political gains. This chapter is a single-authored and peer-reviewed journal paper that the author of this thesis had published in *Religion, State & Society* in 2021 for the purpose of inclusion in the thesis. The chapter concludes by considering the possible

consequences of the pejorative understanding of the 'liberal' Muslim Other label on Malay women's groups in Malaysia, which are examined in the subsequent empirical chapters (Chapters Six to Eight).

Chapter Six: Tensions between Malay Women Groups

This empirical chapter analyses the key tensions between the women activists that act as a barrier to building trust between ideologically different Malay women's groups. The analysis pays close attention to the women's perspectives on ideological differences, past experiences of contention, and the political and religious contexts to better understand why the women may believe they have reasons to be distrustful of each other. The chapter also analyses the women's different conceptions of gender roles, which they use to articulate the ideological boundaries of their group difference.

Chapter Seven: Engaging the Other and Social Learning

This empirical chapter analyses the Malay women activists' perspectives on their experiences of advocacy work to understand why, contrary to expectations, they choose to engage with other Malay women's groups that are ideologically different from their own group. The analysis focuses on the women's experiences that makes them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. The chapter provides an explanation of how the changed perception of other women's groups helps to establish a modicum of trust in the expected good will of women activists from other groups. The chapter then analyses the opportunities for social learning between the women activists that were facilitated by recent inter-group interactions.

Chapter Eight: Intersections Across Ideological Divides

This empirical chapter analyses the intersections in the understandings of the women activists that cuts across the ideological divides of their groups. The intersections over sexist oppression, labelling, and polarised politics constitute areas of common ground where women can cultivate a deeper sense of shared moral values, and in doing so, build bonds of moralistic trust as members in the wider community of Malay and Muslim women in Malaysia. The second section analyses the women's perspectives on fostering trust between different women's

groups. The chapter concludes with reflections on the prospects and challenges for the emergence of a locally rooted and cross cutting decolonial Muslim feminism in Malaysia.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

The concluding chapter explains the significance of the main findings in this thesis for the study of trust and women's groups in polarised plural societies. The chapter also highlights the research's original contributions and areas for future research.

Chapter Two

Ideological Orientations of Malay Women Groups in Malaysia

Malay women must form an association that caters to the progress of women so that they can become more focussed…if there were such an association, women could move forward together. In no time, the useless customary practices that have affected women in a negative manner would be abolished (Ibnu Zain 1930 cited in Musa 2010)

2.1: Introduction

From the 20th century onwards, Malay women activists were key participants in several social movements during pivotal periods in Malaysia. The social movements that Malay women participated in were underpinned by different ideological orientations, which were shaped and made salient by the social, political, and economic conditions of the time. This chapter reviews the academic literature on the significant developments and issues in Malay women's activism and their quest for women's emancipation in Malaysia. As there is a lack of literature on the more contemporary forms of Malay women's activism in Malaysia (especially on women from the Islamic revivalist groups), the chapter adopts a historical approach in reviewing the literature on women's activism in Malaysia by charting the trajectory of Malay women activists' participation in key social movements during the colonial and postcolonial periods of Malaysia. In doing so, the chapter provides an understanding of the historical differentiation of the prevalent ideological orientations of Malay women's groups that today contribute to the national discourse on Islam and Muslim women in Malaysia. This chapter also contributes to a novel mapping of Malay women's groups along these prevalent ideological orientations in Malaysia.

The first portion of the chapter traces the historical participation of Malay women activists in key social movements during the colonial and postcolonial periods of Malaysia, namely the growing influence of Islamic modernism in colonial Malaya at the turn of the 20th century through the 1940s; anticolonial and radical leftist politics in the post-World War Two between 1945 and 1948; the Malay nationalist movement in the 1950s; the multiracial feminist movement in the 1980s; the concurrent burgeoning of the Islamic revivalist *dakwah* (proselytization) movement in the 1980s; and the emergence of Islamic feminism in the late 1980s. The remainder of the chapter maps the women's groups that are studied in the thesis to

analytical categories based on their ideological orientations, namely secular multiracial feminism; Islamic revivalism; and Islamic feminism.

2.2: Malay Women's Participation in Ideological Groups

2.2.1: Islamic Modernism

During British colonialism, gender relations in the Malay community were shaped by *adat* (Malay customary practices) and Islam; both functioned to separate men's activities from women's activities in the private and public spheres of social life. *Adat* was instrumental in socialising males and females to adopt masculine and feminine norms that were deemed socially appropriate in the Malay community. The Malay men were involved in matters of politics and religion in the public sphere; for work, men ploughed the fields, tended to animals, or fished. The Malay women were mostly active in the private sphere where they took charge of household activities. Nevertheless, Malay women's activities also included some productive economic activities such as rice planting and harvesting, gardening, weaving, and pottery making (Hirschman 2016). In general, the young girl was taught to stay home and tend to domestic tasks to pick up "feminine" skills such as cooking, cleaning, weaving, and care giving. She was also not allowed to interact with males, who were not related to her. Her brother, on the other hand, was encouraged by the parents to be active outside the home to pick up "masculine" skills such as building physical strength. So, while the young boy learned to "sail and fight", the young girl learned to "weave and sew" (Manderson 1980, p. 16).

The traditional gendered social life of the Malay community in which men took on active roles (including leadership roles) in the public sphere was also supported by doctrinal interpretations of the concepts of *qiwāmah* and *wilāyah* in Islamic teachings. *Qiwāmah* is understood as the right and duty of the husband to hold authority over his wife in the household while *wilāyah* is understood as the right and duty of male family members to exercise guardianship over female members (Mir-Hosseini et al 2015). Both concepts stem from classical Islamic interpretations of a verse in the Quran: "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" (Quran 4:34). The classical Islamic treatment of gender relations wherein women were

regarded as equal to men in the eyes of God but expected to be obedient and submissive to their male guardians constituted the dominant social understanding prevalent in the Malay regions including Malaysia during this period (Aljunied 2016).

However, the general societal acceptance of this form of traditional gendered social life was challenged when Malays started to develop a sense of bounded group identity juxtaposed against migrant groups after the first world war (1914-1918). By then, British colonialism was already firmly entrenched in colonial Malaya. The massive influx of Chinese migrants and their subsequent economic domination during colonial rule caused Malays to be anxious about their own livelihoods and prospects. Enterprising Chinese merchants were permitted by the British to use migrant Chinese labour in the tin mines rather than Malay labour. Additionally, while the Malays relied on subsistence-farming, the Chinese moved into commercial agriculture; planting rubber proved to be hugely profitable (Hirschman 1986). As one historian noted, with the rapid technological advances and labour needs met by migration, the British and the Chinese did not require the services of the Malays (Khoo 2011). These developments only fostered a growing sense of marginalisation among the Malays. Not only did the Malays start to realise that they were gradually being outnumbered by migrants[7], but they also began to feel marginalised in the social and economic aspects of life in Malaya (Musa 2010).

Leveraging on this growing sense of marginalisation, young Malay reformists, some of whom were educated in British colonial Egypt, were influenced by the Islamic modernist and feminist movements there to push for change within their own community in Malaya (Musa 2010). Both the Islamic modernist movement and the feminist movement in Egypt stressed the need for female emancipation to uplift the Muslim community (Roff 1967). Similarly, the Malay reformists advocated breaking away from aspects of Islamic traditionalism, such as limiting educational and work opportunities for females, which they argued held the Malay community behind compared to the migrant communities in Malaya. The Malay reformists pointed out that the Chinese community comparatively already had far more Chinese vernacular and English-medium schools than the Malay community, and hence the Chinese had available to them more work opportunities compared to the Malays; critically, they argued that the Chinese also emphasised educating Chinese girls while the Malays did not (Musa 2010).

[7] By 1931, there were "1,709,392 Chinese, compared to 1,644,173 Malays, 317,848 'other Malaysians' (sic) and 624,009 Indians" (Musa 2010, p. 248).

This group of young Malay reformists, who came to be known as the Kaum Muda (young reformist group), clashed with the Malay elites and rural religious leaders, who comprised the Kaum Tua (old traditionalist group) (Roff 1967). Through their print publications (periodicals and newspapers) such as the *Al-Imam*, *Al-Ikhwan* and *Saudara*, the Kaum Muda pushed for change in two key areas – a break from *taklid buta* (blind adherence to religious teaching) and formal education for Malay girls (Roff 1967). Even though, the Kaum Muda faced resistance from Malay elites and religious leaders in the Kaum Tua group, their reformist discourse that engaged with religious justifications for change seeped into the consciousness of the younger generation of Malays, who were keen to reconcile their faith with modernity.

While Malay males spearheaded the push for reform, Malay women too soon became more involved. Some of the Malay women, whose parents sent them to be educated in English-medium schools at the turn of the 20th century, became instrumental in advocating the merits of education for Malay girls. For example, Ibnu Zain who was educated in a Christian mission school in Melaka, became a schoolteacher and she started a Malay women's teacher union in 1930. The union under the leadership of Ibnu Zain started its own periodical *Bulan Melayu* (Malay Month), which was the first Malay woman's publication in Malaya focused solely on matters pertaining to Malay women. Prior to this, Malay women contributed their writings to specific columns devoted to women's matters within the male-run reformist periodicals and newspapers (Musa 2010).

An analysis of Malay periodicals during this time (1920 to 1945), indicated that Malay women through their writings in the reformist-oriented publications primarily advocated for female emancipation through formal secular and religious education for girls (Musa 2010). However, the Malay women also stressed against blind imitation of Western feminist influences that the Malay young girls were exposed to in the British-run mission schools. Under the slogan of *moden dididik agama dibela* (modernity nurtured, religion defended), the women upheld the Islamic virtues of motherhood and the importance of educating themselves to raise smart children so that the future generations of Malays to follow would be of the highest calibre (Musa 2010). Therefore, their writings maintained the traditional gendered roles for women as mothers and wives. Yet they were also not averse to criticising Kaum Tua religious leaders for their prohibitive ruling on "free mixing of the sexes" in English-medium schools that made Malay parents reluctant to send their daughters to schools (Musa 2010, p. 259). Through their writings, the Malay women also critiqued *adat* practices that they argued were obsolete and

detrimental to females such as early marriages and polygamy. With argumentation that would later resonate in the discourse of some women activists from the Islamic revivalist and Islamic feminist groups in postcolonial Malaysia, the Malay women used religious-based reasoning to critique *adat* as un-Islamic. For instance, they advocated raising the legal age of marriage for males and females because children lacked the maturity for marriage, and they argued that while the Quran permitted men to have four wives, the Quran also required men to treat all the wives equally which was not adhered to in practice; thus, the women encouraged monogamous marriages (Musa 2010). In this manner, the Malay women in colonial Malaya justified their advocacy for female emancipation through education by referencing religious-based arguments while reinforcing the idea of women's primary roles as mothers and wives.

Yet through writings on their activism, the Malay women also provided literate young Malay women a glimpse of their changing modern world. It was a world in which young women could organise themselves into associations, engage in public speaking events, contribute to professional work such as teaching, and connect with other like-minded women in the different Malay states. These women, riding on the currents of Islamic modernism in Malaya, were instrumental in generating a greater awareness of the detrimental social condition of the Malays and an enthusiasm for formal education for Malay girls as a means for social change. Furthermore, alongside their male counterparts, the women also contributed to a new sense of Malay nationalist identity that would be activated later in the anticolonial movement.

2.2.2: Anticolonialism and Radical Politics

The periodic acts of violence by Malay resistors throughout British colonial rule were indicative of anticolonial sentiments within the Malay Muslim community. These sentiments were largely kept in check by British colonisers through a combination of techniques that involved coercion, bureaucratisation of Muslim affairs, policing, covert surveillance, and strategic collaboration with Muslim elites, i.e., collaboration with members of the Malay royalty and Muslim leaders known to advocate for Muslim causes (Hussin 2016; Aljunied 2019). By retaining the ceremonial structure of the Malay monarchy and facilitating the role of the royals in the management of Muslim religious affairs, the colonisers reinforced the hierarchical ordering of Malay society – i.e., the Malay royals and aristocrats as sovereign leaders of the Malay community, with the colonisers as the overseers.

The British colonisers used education as a mean to cultivate a new class of pro-British Malays that they could collaborate with. They were more successful in this endeavour in the urban areas than in the rural village areas where Malays predominantly lived. They opened modern public schools, both English-medium and vernacular schools, and facilitated Christian missionaries who set up schools that were open to students of all religious faiths. The English-educated Malays could obtain jobs within the colonial administration, in schools, and in journalism so they were economically in a better position compared to Malays in the villages. Even so, most Malays stayed away from the modern public schools run by the colonisers and the Christian missionaries over worries about Christianisation (Aljunied 2019). This meant that the overall pre-World War Two Malay enrolment numbers in modern public schools were relatively small. On the other hand, the number of *pondoks* (Islamic schools in Malay villages) grew rapidly as a response to the colonisers' introduction of modern public schools. The *pondoks* functioned not only as sites of Islamic learning but also as sites of political socialisation and spaces where students developed an anti-colonial consciousness; students were taught that only Muslims could be legitimate rulers in Malaya (Aljunied 2019). The *pondoks* though remained largely male-dominated spaces due to traditional beliefs over gender roles prevalent in the Malay villages. As the previous sub-section indicated, Malay reformists buoyed by the currents of Islamic modernism pushed against traditionalism, but they were less successful in changing mindsets in villages where the Kaum Tua religious leaders retained strong influence. The colonisers had no interest in curbing the *pondoks* because traditionalism ensured Malay deference to Malay royals and aristocrats, who were in turn managed by the colonials (Amoroso 1998).

Most of the educated Malay women in Malaya during the pre-World War Two period came from elite family backgrounds and / or from families which were aligned with Islamic modernist beliefs about female education. Some of these women, particularly those who had the benefit of both secular and religious education, emerged as leaders in the anticolonial movement after World War Two. Combining secular and religious justifications, these women leveraged changes in the post-war climate to garner mass support for anticolonialism. The first change related to Malay women having had to fend for themselves during the Japanese occupation years when their menfolk were either killed in combat or absent from the home in employment; illiterate Malay women had a more difficult time compared to literate women when sourcing an income (Manderson 1980). This experience, coupled with the realisation that literacy was necessary in a rapidly changing post-war capitalist economy, contributed to a

mindset shift about female education in the post-war period. Malay female enrolment in schools grew at a pace that far exceeded the pre-war enrolment trends and consequently Malay women's employment opportunities increased (Aljunied 2016). This social change contributed to a mass of Malay women, who were now more attuned to ideas about colonial injustice and female emancipation. Second, the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War Two had irretrievably destroyed the image of the British colonisers as invincible. The numerous Malay cultural associations that had burgeoned in the pre-war period over social causes took on an overtly political stance after the war (Aljunied 2019). Political associations were organised around Malay identity in which Malay race and Islam were required qualifiers for membership. Paradoxically, the racial categories that were constructed by the colonisers to divide and rule Malaya were appropriated by Malays themselves to unite as a bounded group in the anticolonial movement.

As the British colonisers sought to re-establish their control in the post-war period, several Malay political parties emerged to push for decolonialisation, two of which were instrumental in shaping subsequent political developments – the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM, Malay Nationalist Party of Malaya) and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). From the outset, the PKMM inspired by the independence movement in neighbouring Indonesia was the more radical of the two. The PKMM critiqued both colonialism and traditionalism as twin evils that kept Malay society backward and demanded immediate independence. The PKMM advocated the restructuring of traditional Malay society along egalitarian lines, even suggesting that modern societies did not need traditional rulers like the Malay kings (Amoroso 1998). On the other hand, UMNO's upper echelon comprising of English-educated Malay aristocrats and bureaucrats, self-described as "right-wing politicians", did not demand immediate independence (Amoroso 1998, p. 258). However, UMNO had to contend with the growing political consciousness of the Malays across class lines who were receptive to PKMM's message of egalitarianism.

These early political debates among Malays were cut short when the colonisers unveiled the Malayan Union plan in late 1945 – the plan entailed the union of the Malay states and stripping away the power of the Malay royals. Although the question of traditional rulers in an independent Malaya was debated among Malays, the imposed plan by the colonisers was shocking to Malays that both PKMM and UMNO aligned to oppose it. UMNO successfully framed itself as defenders of the Malay rulers and Malay birth rights (Amoroso 1998). PKMM

was the first party to create women and youth wings, drawing massive crowds to their rallies. Newspapers highlighted the large presence of Malay women in the rallies as a significant change (Amoroso 1998). This strong show of Malay opposition convinced the colonisers to abandon the Malayan Union plan.

As progress on independence talks stagnated, the PKMM and other anticolonial groups continued to organise rallies to recruit Malay members. In this climate, the Malay women's political group, Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS, Generation of Women's Consciousness), was formed with support by PKMM's male leaders. As such, AWAS was closely linked with PKMM and a male youth group, the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API, Generation of Awakened Youth). The AWAS women leaders were tasked with raising the political consciousness of Malay women. Although Malay women were just as interested as Malay men in ending colonial rule, most Malays regarded politics as a male domain. The AWAS women sought to change that mindset. They organised rallies, marches, speeches, and classes to educate Malay women on a variety of issues that ranged from the importance of female education to gender equality to marriage reforms to the anti-colonial movement (Aljunied 2013). In contrast, UMNO, which subsequently formed its own women's wing, the Kaum Ibu (Mother's Group), restricted its women members from public speaking at rallies during this time. Unsurprisingly, AWAS quickly became the largest women's political group with support from working-class and peasant Malay women (Aljunied 2013).

However, internal divisions arose within AWAS when its male counterparts, PKMM and API, moved closer to Indonesian revolutionary and left-wing Chinese groups. Close links were forged between the openly communist parties in Malaya and API. Some AWAS women leaders became increasingly concerned by the Marxist-leaning rhetoric of their male counterparts. The Chinese communists advocated the abolishment of the monarchical system in Malaya. This was like the stance some within PKMM and API initially pushed for but largely abandoned after the Malayan Union episode. For some AWAS women, aligning with communists who pushed for abolishment of the monarchy was at odds with the thinking of most Malays. These AWAS women leaders regarded the Malay monarchs as important unifiers for the social fabric of Malay society (Aljunied 2013). While their male counterparts in API attempted to synthesise Marxist thought with Islamic theology, some AWAS women still saw this as a "foreign ideology" (Aljunied 2013, p. 162). This first group of AWAS women leaders resigned and later joined UMNO's Kaum Ibu. The second group of AWAS women leaders adopted a more

confrontational approach aligned with API's increasingly militant activities, which included jungle warfare training. However, AWAS disintegrated quickly after API was banned in 1948 and the colonisers started the 12-year Malayan Emergency offensive against the communists (Aljunied 2013). Malay women's engagement with radical politics, where they rallied against the twin injustices of patriarchy and colonialism, was relatively short-lived.

2.2.3: Malay Nationalism

The demise of AWAS benefited UMNO's women wing, Kaum Ibu. Kaum Ibu welcomed into its group many of the former AWAS members, who brought with them their agenda of female emancipation, female education, and gender equality. The influence from these former AWAS members spurred Kaum Ibu's confidence to work on bulking up its women membership, which grew substantially (Aljunied 2013). However, UMNO's primary rationale for forming the women's wing was to harness Malay women support to oppose the colonisers' Malayan Union plan; Kaum Ibu's tentative moves to advance Malay women's interests and rights were considered by UMNO as secondary to the goal of consolidating popular Malay support for UMNO's leadership in the political bargaining for eventual independence from British colonial rule (Lai 2003).

The open activism of Kaum Ibu unsettled the dominant patriarchal culture within UMNO and Malay society. Yet UMNO's male leadership had to strategically balance patriarchal culture with Malay women's growing desire to be represented in the shaping of an independent country. The active presence of Malay women in the political sphere led to push back from Muslim religious leaders, who argued that women were neglecting their primary roles in the family. The Kaum Ibu women leaders defended their activities arguing that "if women take part in politics, men will be inspired to work hard" (Aljunied 2013, p. 170). With support from UMNO's male leadership, Kaum Ibu women leaders secured for women the right to vote in the constitutional draft of the agreement for an independent federation of Malaya (Lai 2003). When the Council of Ulema (Islamic religious scholars) banned women from participating in politics on the argument that free mixing between the sexes in the political sphere was un-Islamic, UMNO's male leadership supported Kaum Ibu. The UMNO male support dented the impact of the ban (Lai 2003). However, the UMNO male leadership also took steps to keep Kaum Ibu in a subordinate position, even though the women's large membership afforded the

Kaum Ibu leaders much bargaining power. For example, when UMNO deliberately excluded women candidates in the Johor state election lists, the Kaum Ibu president staged a protest with her fellow women members; she was duly fired from her position for breaching the code of party discipline (Lai 2003). In this manner, UMNO male leadership dissuaded Kaum Ibu women from adopting a confrontational approach to change the gender status quo within the party (Manderson 1980).

Furthermore, without competition from the radical and leftist anticolonial groups which had fragmented under the colonisers' anti-communist offensive, UMNO developed the notion of "Malay unity" as a key value necessary to prevent dissension between Malay groups, including within their own party ranks. UMNO then successfully crafted a Malay nationalist narrative for itself in which Malay unity was the key to Malay success. In this narrative, UMNO was the Malay hero that united Malays by protecting the Malay states' sovereignty from British colonial machinations and Chinese domination (Amoroso 1998). This narrative in which Malay unity was a central value set the tone for subsequent Malay politics, where confrontational politics was condemned as divisive, and closed-door negotiations favoured. The male dominance coupled with the negative social view of confrontational politics meant that Kaum Ibu (later renamed Wanita UMNO, Women of UMNO) was forced to adopt a more passive approach to advocate for women's rights in the late colonial period; the passive approach continued through to the postcolonial period (Lai 2003). Kaum Ibu's primary role within UMNO was to develop its grassroots capacity to organise and harness Malay women to vote for the party during elections. As a result, Kaum Ibu women were underrepresented in the UMNO party leadership and later in the UMNO-led government (Manderson 1980). The women members largely accepted their supportive role in the party as a reflection of their traditional roles in society and in keeping with party lines. (Lai 2003). Women playing supportive roles within political parties was also a norm in the Chinese and Indian race-based parties, which was indicative that patriarchal culture was dominant across the different racial communities in Malaysian society (Lai 2003).

2.2.4: Secular Multiracial Feminism

Consequently, in the immediate postcolonial context, advocacy for women's rights usually came from groups outside the established political parties and the requests would then be

channelled through to the UMNO-led government via the women members in Kaum Ibu/Wanita UMNO. Six years after independence in 1963, a non-governmental multiracial women's organisation, National Council for Women's Organisations (NCWO) was formed to facilitate such backdoor negotiations, and to unite several smaller women's groups through collective advocacy efforts for women's rights. The NCWO was the brainchild of a Wanita UMNO leader, and it maintained close links with the UMNO-led government. In fact, the early key leaders of NCWO were also women leaders in Wanita UMNO and/or ministers in the UMNO-led government (Lai 2003). The leadership structure in NCWO mirrored the consociational race-based model of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, which comprised of UMNO and the Chinese and Indian race-based political parties.[8] The women leaders of NCWO were "deliberately" selected from women activists in the three main racial groups in Malaysia (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 20). In this way, NCWO's proposals for women's reform were meant to be formed through the multiracial consensus of women activists from the three main racial groups of Malaysia.

NCWO became the main vehicle through which the women representatives from the race-based political parties and non-governmental women's groups lobbied the UMNO-led government for policy changes. Given the NCWO's close links with the UMNO-led government, this approach was successful with the enactment of several important women-friendly reforms that included "job security and maternity leave for women in the public sector (1969), separate taxation for women (1972 and 1991), outlawing polygamy for non-Muslims (1976), and raising the age of marriage to eighteen years and instituting civil family laws for all non-Muslims" (Lai 2003, p. 60). However, the NCWO's close links with the government also meant that it could only advocate on issues that were not politically contentious or that reflected the concerns of elite and middle-class women (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006).

The NCWO's limitation was illustrated early on when women industrial workers united through trade union activism to demand equal pay (Ariffin 1997). With the rapid industrialisation of the Malaysian economy in the postcolonial context, low-wage manufacturing was an important industry in the country's development plan. Even as the

[8] Consociationalism is a form of democratic governance in deeply divided plural societies, which is based on power-sharing agreements between political elites from the different social groups (Lijphart 1969). In the case of Malaysia, the power-sharing in the Barisan Nasional government was between elites from the three main racial groups.

government encouraged female education and the entry of women into employment, it also favoured a depoliticised and feminised low-wage workforce. As such, while NCWO advocated for equal pay for women in the public sector and achieved this, it had to steer clear from pressing the same for the women industrial workers (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). In this manner then, NCWO's advocacy successes were in line with the government's brand of market feminism, in which women-friendly and gender equality policies only made sense to pursue and implement if they fitted the market logics. Consequently, such state-civil society alliances on issues intersecting gender and the economy were deeply classed, with the concerns of women from the elite and the middle class being more likely to be addressed by the government than those from the lower classes (Elias 2015b).

Furthermore, the ability of women activists to form cross-cutting alliances across racial and class lines was constrained by the UMNO-led government's interventionist approach to contain the growth of an independent civil society as it sought to consolidate its power. First, the government reined in trade unions and newspapers by using existing colonial-era legislation and enacting new restrictive legislation (Rodan 2004). Unionisation was banned in the foreign-owned manufacturing companies. Second, in the aftermath of the 1969 racial riots between the Malays and Chinese, the government adopted pro-Malay affirmative action plans under the New Economic Policy (NEP) to economically uplift the Malay and the Indigenous communities. The government also actively engaged the Malay community through the creation of state-sponsored Malay associations and forming close relationships with existing Malay associations. The effect of the government's overtures to the Malay community was that Malay civil society groups largely did not challenge the existing political order because there was a perception their interests were being taken care of by the government (Giersdorf and Croissant 2011). Third, as the next sub-section in this chapter details, Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups were seen by Malays as a more legitimate avenue for the expression of any dissatisfaction through the language of Islamic principles. Given these constraints, women's activism in the postcolonial context became largely circumscribed as an urban phenomenon shaped by women from the elite and middle-class.

The inability of women activists to form cross-cutting alliances across racial and class lines meant that women's groups in the urban areas of Malaysia adopted a secular orientation to attract members from all the three main racial groups. In the 1980s, there was a growth of women's groups that were started by middle-class woman in the urban areas, many of whom

were educated in the West (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). These women were influenced by global feminist trends, and they focused on the issue of violence against women (Lai 2003). While the women's groups were affiliated with NCWO, they also functioned independently by forming a new coalition specifically to advocate on the cause – the Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women (JAG-VAW). Part of the reason for choosing this cause was because it was not yet an issue under the purview of the state, which meant that the women activists could be first to set the agenda for reforms (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). The women activists also recognised that the issue affected women across racial, religious, and class divides, which would be a potentially unifying cause for women (Lee 2018).

The women activists created multiracial spaces where secularised discourse was meant to facilitate building a common ground between women of different races and religions. The discourse used in the violence against women advocacy work was inspired from a mix of ideologies such as "feminism, liberalism, socialism and even Marxism" (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 20). These spaces though were limited in their outreach to Malay women. Despite the growing significance of Islamic identity and discourse within the Malay community, the women activists from these secular groups could not engage with Islam. Partly because many of the women activists involved in the cause were non-Malay, it was difficult to make inroads into spaces where Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups, Malay associations and UMNO party affiliates already had established strong grassroots connections with the Malay community (Lai 2003). The women's groups and their emphasis on the values of universal rights and equality could not inspire the women of the "Malay rural heartland" in the same way the Malay women in the anticolonial and nationalist movements had been roused (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 25). The women's groups were eventually successful in pressing the government for reforms in rape and domestic violence legislations through a mixed strategy of closed-door negotiations, lobbying and protest marches. However, the enacted legislations differed from the women activists' original reform proposals. For the protective benefits of the legislation to apply to all women under federal law, the women activists had to agree to remove marital rape as an offense due to opposition from the Islamic bureaucracies which maintained a masculinist reading of Islamic doctrine in which rape within marriage was inconceivable (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006).

The women activists realised that they needed more Malay Muslim women activists as allies in advocacy work, but they remained largely disconnected from the growing number of Malay

women activists in the Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups. As the Malaysian state took on a more authoritarian stance in the late 1980s under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (Giersdorf and Croissant 2011), several women activists adopted the language of human rights in their advocacy work. However, this alignment with human rights left some women activists vulnerable to periodic accusations by the Malaysian state of importing foreign ideologies like liberalism and feminism. Some women activists who became involved with human rights activism were even subject to arrests by the government, as occurred during Operation Lalang in 1987 (Lai 2003). In this context, the women's groups in the urban areas became characterised by a feminist activism that emphasised secular multiracialism as a unifying value.

2.2.5: Islamic Revivalism

The growth of secular multiracial women's groups in the urban areas were matched by the concurrent growth of Malay women's participation in the Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups in the 1970s and 1980s. These Islamic groups were focused on educating the Malay society to inculcate Islamic values as a mean of social and political empowerment. The Islamic revivalist movement was an effort to respond to significant social transformations in Malay society during the postcolonial period through a reaffirmation of the Malay Muslim identity. The Malaysian state's fast-paced industrialisation development initiatives opened the UMNO-led government to criticism from Islamic revivalist groups that the government had adopted a secularist style of governance, which prioritised economic progress at the expense of Islamic values. These groups pushed for a return to an Islamic way of life by recentring Islam in both the public and private spheres, which they believed were crucial for the development of a modern Malaysian society (Abu-Bakar 1981). Although the Islamic revivalist groups were heterogenous in their orientations (Sufi-inspired, devotional-focused, modernist, or political), they were all united on the idea of Muslim brotherhood and mutual assistance as means to create an Islamic socio-political order in Malaysia (Aljunied 2019). As such, these groups expanded their grassroots networks and collectively contributed to an upsurge in Islamic consciousness among Malays.

This thesis focuses on the Islamic modernist-inspired revivalist groups because of their influential role in the Islamisation of the Malaysian state and society. The Islamic-modernist inspired Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s such as the

Angkatan Belia Islam (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, ABIM) and the *Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia* (Congregation of Islamic Reform, JIM) comprised of young and university educated Malays, who were beneficiaries of the pro-Malay affirmative policies that included financial support for overseas education. Many members of these Islamic groups were educated in the West and in the Middle East, and they were inspired by the idea of unity through a global Muslim *ummah* (community). The groups established transnational linkages with other Islamic groups, established chapters around the world and supported global Muslim causes. However, at the local level within Malaysia, the groups remained Malay-centred and their *dakwah* activities were geared towards Malays. The leadership of Islamic revivalist groups were comprised of only Malays and the groups were supportive of Malay special rights. In this sense, the Islamic revivalist groups were aligned with UMNO's vision of a Malay-first Malaysia even as they advocated for an Islamic-centred country (Aljunied 2019).

Not only were the Islamic revivalist groups aligned with the UMNO-led government's Malay-first governance outlook, the groups also were onboard with the government's push for female education. Yet the groups also emphasised religious interpretations that required Malay women to guard their sexualities and prioritise their feminine roles as wives and mothers, which were framed as innate (Ong 1987). In this manner, the Islamic revivalist religious teachings responded to societal concerns within the Malay community that were sparked by the rapid pace of social changes. The UMNO-led government's efforts to industrialise the economy led to more Malays moving from rural areas to the urban areas to work in manufacturing factories, including large numbers of young unmarried women. Not only were more women encouraged to attend schools, for the first time more young women obtained employment in factories and they lived their lives outside of the supervision of their parents who remained in the villages. New concerns in the Malay community emerged about the morality of young unmarried working women (Ong 1987). These concerns, articulated in the Malay community by religious leaders and elders, acted as cultural pressures on young women to remain steadfast to Malay traditionalism through their increased attention to acts of religious adherence. Therefore, even though the young women acquired economic mobility, they reaffirmed traditional gender roles that maintained the patriarchal hierarchy in the Malay family and society; most young women worked with an objective to acquire and save money, and most returned to their villages for marriage (Ong 1987). The Islamic revivalist groups' ideology though served to allay such concerns by asserting that women could be educated and be productive workers, and yet still be pious Muslims. Therefore, as more educated women entered the professional workforce in

the 1990s (Sloane-White 2017), the Islamic revivalist groups maintained the patriarchal understanding of women's primary roles as wives and mothers (see Kausar 1995). Where secular feminists stressed gender equality, Islamic revivalist groups stressed that the man-woman relationship in Islam was complementarity (Kausar 1995).

The Islamic revivalist groups' ideology was amenable to educated Malay women. It offered women a way to be engaged with modern society through expressions of Malay and Muslim identities, which *dakwah* activists argued were rooted in indigeneity and thus an authentic form of women's empowerment. As with the nationalist movement in the 1950s, Islamic women activists were tasked with recruitment of a mass of Malay women followers for the Islamic revivalist cause (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). The Islamic women activists had their own women's wings, and the activities were often segregated by gender. One of the first initiative of the Islamic revivalist groups was to increase religious observations and practices of Malay women. For example, women activists from ABIM were one of the first Islamic revivalist groups in Malaysia to give out free *tudungs* (headscarves) to Malay women to encourage veiling.[9] The Islamic women activists also set up a network of Islamic kindergartens (Tadika/Taman Asuhan Kanak-kanak Islam, TASKI) and day-care centres, with Islamic education as a central part of the curriculum (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). Similarly with the male activists, the women activists in the various branches around the country organised *halaqah* (small religious study groups) for their women members to educate themselves on Islam and its teachings and to motivate one another to be better Muslims. Unlike the rote learning approach in traditional Islamic circles, the women would read and engage with written work by well-known Islamic modernists. In later years, they also expanded their study to include a wider range of scholarship on Islam. Given that most of the women activists had a formal secular educational background (apart from exposure to religion through their Muslim upbringing), the *halaqahs* were important informal avenues through which the women developed their Islamic knowledge. This meant that the first generation of Islamic women activists – those in the 1970s and 1980s – were dependent on religious scholarship that was male-dominated.

[9] The current president of ABIM, Faizal Aziz, recounted this initiative during a radio interview on 9 December 2022. (https://bfm.my/podcast/bigger-picture/good-things/abim-on-building-a-moderate-malaysia, retrieved 10 January 2023).

As such, Islamic women activists had to balance competing visions of the ideal Muslim women. At one level, the Islamic modernist thought within the Islamic revivalist groups forwarded a more progressive understanding of women's roles compared to Islamic traditionalism. The women activists in Islamic revivalist groups were free (and encouraged by the males) to pursue higher education and professional careers. Educated women were educated mothers, who were well placed to collectively shape a vibrant and dominant Malay Muslim society. In fact, JIM, the precursor to IKRAM, one of the Islamic revivalist groups studied in this thesis, advertised the professional qualifications of its women activists in its brochures to attract women members (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). Several of the second-generation women activists in the women's wing of IKRAM interviewed in this thesis work as university professors, medical doctors and in scientific fields (see Appendix 1 for the participant profiles). At another level, Muslim women were portrayed by Islamic revivalist groups as the "integrating force within families", meaning Muslim women's roles as mothers and wives were highly prioritised and valorised (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 95). The Islamic women activists were often expected by their male activist counterparts to play supportive roles along traditional gender lines within the Islamic revivalist groups. For instance, interviews with some of the Islamic women activists for this thesis revealed that women activists were expected to do the cooking and babysitting when the Islamic revivalist groups organised public events. Leadership roles for Islamic women activists, especially in the political sphere, were generally discouraged (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006).

However, this understanding on the incompatibility of women and leadership prevalent in Islamic revivalist groups was gradually contested by Islamic women activists after former ABIM leader Anwar's ousting from the UMNO-led government. Anwar's wife, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, started and ran a political party to spur democratic reforms after his imprisonment. The move by Dr. Wan Azizah, who had retained her close links to ABIM, was an inspiration for Islamic women activists. Since then, a few Islamic women activists from Islamic revivalist groups entered electoral politics and some won parliament seats, including Fuziah Salleh who was a key women's leader in the now-defunct Islamic revivalist group, JIM. In this manner, Islamic women activists pushed back against patriarchal understandings on the permissibility of women as leaders by expanding and legitimising more avenues for Muslim women's participation in society. Yet, they reinscribed patriarchal understandings along traditional gender lines when they accepted and propagated the idea that it is the responsibility of women to be the integrating force of the Muslim family through their roles as mothers and

wives. Paradoxically, Islamic women activists epitomise women's double burden in modern capitalist society; the lives that women leaders in Islamic revivalist groups lead convey the perception that the ideal Muslim woman is one who achieves success in the educational and professional spheres while caring for her family in the domestic sphere.

2.2.6: Islamic Feminism

The Islamic revivalist *dakwah* movement at the civil society level was coupled with the growing empowerment of the Islamic religious bureaucracy at the state level (Hamayotsu 2003). Islamic law reforms increasingly privileged masculinist interpretations of Islamic religious texts, which entrenched patriarchy formally through the force of law binding on all Muslims in Malaysia (Mohamed 2010). By the late 1980s, developments in this vein were concerning enough for a group of Malay women to gather informally to discuss occurrences of discrimination faced by Muslim women living under jurisdiction of the Federal Territories Islamic Family Law Act of 1984 (Basarudin 2016).[10] The initial gatherings were organised by Malay women lawyers from the Syariah (Islamic law) subcommittee of the Association of Women Lawyers (AWL). The Malay women lawyers, one of whom was also the president of the AWL, had received calls from Muslim women who complained that the patriarchal attitudes of Syariah court officials prevented them from receiving justice on family law matters adjudicated in the Syariah courts. The Muslim women complained that Syariah court officials claimed that men were superior to women (Basarudin 2016). The women's complaints of abuse by their husbands such as beatings, forced sexual intercourse and taking on a new wife without consent of the first wife were often met with claims by Syariah court officials that such acts were "the rights of a husband in Islam" and "women need to be patient" (Basarudin 2016, p. 81). Under the aegis of the AWL, the women lawyers engaged with Syariah court officials and the Women's Affairs department within the government to advocate for changes, but there was no concrete progress. The women lawyers were also troubled by the growing normalisation within the Malay community of the claim that such abuses were the legitimate rights of husbands within Islam (Basarudin 2016).

The women were "liberal feminists" (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 88) in the sense that their understanding of women's rights came from secular feminist discourse. However, they recognised that there was a need to engage with Islamic doctrine to determine for themselves

[10] The Federal Territories is an urban district in Malaysia, which includes the national capital of Kuala Lumpur.

whether Islam indeed deemed men superior to women. Along with Muslim women from other professions such as journalism, public policy, and academia, the women lawyers formed a religious study group to seek answers directly from the Islamic texts. This move represented a shift from analysing the legal aspects of injustice to women in the Syariah Courts to analysing the Islamic doctrinal sources that court officials and religious leaders claimed informed Syariah laws. The motivation for this shift, as one member in the religious study group highlighted, was that many of them simply could not reconcile their personal experiences of an egalitarian Islam with the rigid form of patriarchal Islam that was being implemented through law by the religious bureaucracy.[11] The lives of the women were until then untouched by knowledge of and practices of a rigid patriarchal Islam, which highlighted their privileged social location. They were women who had attained educational qualifications in secular fields, established professional careers, and lived in the urban areas of Malaysia – their social locations shielded them from the realities of patriarchal Islam experienced in other parts of Malaysia which indicated their elite status in society (Basarudin 2016). In their endeavour to study Islamic texts, the women were guided by an American-born Islamic Studies scholar, Amina Wadud, who was at that time an assistant professor at the International Islamic University in Malaysia. Wadud's approach entailed reading the Islamic texts "from the female experience", a feminist methodological approach that she later detailed in her seminal book on Islam and gender – *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Wadud 1999, p. 3). According to Wadud, the Islamic ethos in the Quranic text confirms gender equality; therefore, the Quran itself contained the grounds through which women could legitimately contest their unjust treatment by men (Wadud 1999).

The women in the religious study group formally registered Sisters in Islam (SIS) as a non-governmental organisation in 1993. The women's move to reading Islamic texts to uncover the grounds for women's rights was part of an emergent trend in other Muslim societies around the world; a growing body of academic scholarship identified this trend as Islamic feminism (examples of scholarship include Cooke 2001; Moghadam 2002; Mir-Hosseini 2004; Badran 2009). Islamic feminists argue that the dominant understanding of gender relations in Islam in the Muslim societies is based on male experiences and interests. This is because historically only elite men were in privileged positions to interpretate Islamic doctrine (Barlas 2002). The

[11] Comments by a founding member of Sisters in Islam, the first and only Islamic feminist group in Malaysia, during a public seminar held at Harvard University in October 2022 (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9I8VhFlNN4, last retrieved Jan 12, 2023).

problematic aspects of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that disadvantaged women are reflective of this male domination and against the fundamental Islamic values of justice, equality and compassion. Islamic feminists also distinguish between *syariah* (literal meaning, correct path) and *fiqh*. *Fiqh* is derived from human interpretation of Islamic texts to realise the *syariah*, but since humans are fallible, classical Islamic scholars accepted that *fiqh* was open to reform (Basarudin 2016). Historically, this classical understanding of *fiqh* contributed to the vibrancy and diversity of legal opinions within the Islamic jurisprudence tradition. However, this classical understanding of *fiqh* diminished through the formal codification of Islamic family law during colonialism and in postcolonial countries like Malaysia, with the consequence that most Malays believe that *fiqh* is the literal word of God that cannot be changed (Moustafa 2013). Since its inception, SIS focuses its advocacy on *fiqh* reforms in matters related to women and the family by justifying their positions based on arguments from Islamic feminist scholarship (Basarudin 2016).

2.3: Mapping of Women's Ideological Groups

2.3.1: Analytical Categories

The preceding review of the literature on significant developments and issues in Malay women's activism and their quest for emancipation in Malaysia highlights the historical differentiation of the main ideological orientations of Malay women's groups that today contribute to the national discourse on Islam and Muslim women in Malaysia. The ideological orientations that are most relevant in contemporary Malaysian civil society constitute the three analytical categories by which the women's groups in this study are grouped – namely, secular multiracial feminism, Islamic revivalism, and Islamic feminism. The table below provides an overview of the women's groups included in this thesis, followed by the details of the groups in the subsequent sub-sections in this chapter.

Secular Multiracial Feminism	Islamic Feminism	Islamic Revivalism
• Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW) • Kryss Network • Dear Her • Malaysian Youths for Education Reform (MYER)*	• Sisters in Islam (SIS)	• Helwa ABIM (women's wing of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, ABIM) • Wanita IKRAM (women's wing of Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM is an Arabic word that means honour)

Table 1: Ideological Orientations of Malay Women Groups
** MYER's membership included males*

2.3.2: Secular Multiracial Feminism

2.3.2.1: ARROW

The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW) was established in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city in Malaysia, in 1993. Since then, ARROW maintains its headquarters in Malaysia, and it has expanded with regional office presence in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines. It also has partnerships with different activist groups at the national, regional, and global levels, with a self-declared network reach of stakeholders in 120 countries.[12] The focus of its advocacy is on gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights. ARROW produces and disseminates research reports (e.g., country annual reports, thematic reports, and training manuals) and provides training for other activists and media professionals. The ARROW webpage with the images and biographies of the staff members from the Malaysia headquarters indicate that the activists are from all three racial groups, with approximately 25% from the Malay racial group.[13] ARROW's recent research work on Malaysia include a 2018 joint report with Sisters in Islam on "Child Marriage: Its Relationship with Religion, Culture and Patriarchy". ARROW initiated a Gender Equality Initiative in 2020, which was funded by the "Connecting Europe Facility of the European Union". The interlocuter from ARROW for this research study confirmed that while ARROW receives some funding from the Malaysian government, it must continuously

[12] https://arrow.org.my/about-arrow/, last retrieved on Jan 14, 2022.
[13] Staff, https://arrow.org.my/about-arrow/, last retrieved on Jan 14, 2022.

seek grants from abroad in order to fund its activities and staff payroll. The output for the European-funded initiative were two training manuals for the media and civil society organisations "to explore the concept of gender inequality and its impact on people, in particular, girls, women and LGBTIQ+ persons," (ARROW 2021, p. 5).

2.3.2.2: KRYSS Network

KRYSS Network was started in 2017 by two women, who are veteran human rights activists in Malaysia. KRYSS Network is a relatively new women's group, with a small core team. The core team comprises of activists from all three racial groups, with approximately 12% from the Malay group. The group advocates for women/girls and gender non-conforming persons, with a focus in three primary areas: shaping public discourse for gender equality and non-discrimination; elimination of hate speech and online gender-based violence; and institutional reforms and social change.[14] At the time the research for this thesis was conducted (2020-2021), the interlocuter from KRYSS Network worked on projects about online gender-based violence (OGBV) and gender-based hate speech, and developed gender-sensitive guidelines for media professionals. The group organised online workshops on OGBV for feminist activists. It also conducted a teaching event for primary school children on the issue of sexual harassment and child marriage. Pictures of this teaching event advertised on the group's webpage indicated that most of the schoolchildren were Indian; this meant that outreach to the majority Malay group was limited.[15] These activities in 2020 were funded with overseas grants from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) and Access Now (an international non-profit organisation).

2.3.2.3: Dear Her

Dear Her was started in 2018 by a group of undergraduate students from the International Islamic University Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. Based on the interview with an interlocuter from this group, the group attracts a significant number of young Malay women, most of whom are undergraduate students. The group's founders maintain a secular discourse by choosing not

[14] About Us, https://kryss.network/, last retrieved on Jan 14, 2022.
[15] #REVOLUSIS School Tour, https://kryss.network/2020/02/27/revolusis-school-tour/, last retrieved on Jan 14, 2022.

to discuss religion, in order to prevent differences of opinion to cause divisions within the group. This is because the focus of the group's advocacy is on sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual assault, which are considered taboo topics for the Malay community. However, the founders of the group believe these issues affect Malay girls and women precisely because they are under-discussed and young people do not understand the notion of consent. The group uses social media as the primary avenue to generate awareness about consent and sexual abuses.[16] The group does not maintain a webpage, nor is information about its members made available in the public domain. However, leaders of the group appeared on televised panel debates on the topic of sexual harassment, which gave the group mainstream visibility between 2018-2021. Since the group is solely volunteer run, it does not seek funds for its activities. Dear Her is representative of the flurry of activism in Malaysia by the Gen Z demographic (25 years old and younger) on a variety of different issues between 2018 and 2022. The Gen Z's turn to activism in the urban areas of Malaysia was sparked by a youth movement in 2016 to lower the voting age, and the possibility of social change inspired by the first-ever change of the ruling government in 2018 (Tirtayana 2021).

2.3.2.4: Malaysian Youths for Education Reform

The Malaysian Youths for Education Reform (MYER) group was a Gen Z-led movement started in 2020. MYER advocated for education reform that represented student voices in Malaysia.[17] Therefore, this group did not focus solely on girls/women and gender issues. MYER produced a report with proposals for reforms on the government's five-year educational plan for the country, the Malaysian Education Blueprint. It also tackled issues on the digital divide in schools and accessibility to quality education, topics that became pertinent during the pandemic lockdowns in 2020. MYER's membership was multiracial and included males. The interlocuter from this group was included in this thesis study for her advocacy work on gender in education and sexual literacy under MYER, and her connections with other women activists within Kuala Lumpur's activism circles. MYER dissolved in March 2022. However, the interlocuter is also a member in a leadership position with another Gen Z-led group, the Malaysian Youth Diplomacy.[18] The interlocuter is representative of some Malay Gen Z

[16] Twitter, https://twitter.com/dearHER18, last retrieved on Jan. 14, 2022.
[17] https://myermovement.carrd.co/, last retrieved on Jan. 14, 2022.
[18] https://www.diplomacymy.com/, last retrieved on Jan. 14, 2022.

activists from the urban areas, who engaged in multiple activist causes, but notably refrain from commenting publicly on issues related to religion.

2.3.3: Islamic Revivalism

2.3.3.1: Helwa ABIM

Helwa ABIM is the women's wing of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, ABIM). Helwa ABIM was formally established in 1974. The acronym Helwa refers to the women wing's primary focus which is *hal ehwal wanita* (women's affairs). The head of Helwa ABIM holds the women's affairs portfolio in her other role as vice-president of ABIM. The other four vice-presidents of ABIM are usually male and they hold the portfolios in education, media, NGO engagement, and humanitarian services. The membership of ABIM as a whole is predominantly female – one interlocuter estimated that more than 60% of ABIM's 200k members nationwide are females. Therefore, female attendance at ABIM's events typically outnumber the males. As a youth organisation, Helwa ABIM has a cut-off age at 40 years old. However, most older members transition to an affiliated Islamic revivalist group, Persatuan Wadah Pencerdasan Umat Malaysia (Movement for an Informed Society Malaysia, WADAH) and retain contact with the younger members in ABIM. In this way, the former Helwa members, especially those who were in leadership positions within the group, serve as mentors to the younger women activists. Helwa gets funds from various sources including yearly membership fees, donations from former members, proceeds from *waqaf* (charitable endowment), and from the government. It also occasionally obtains foreign funding on a project-basis, including a recent grant from the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Apart from organising educational outreach events and talks for its members and the public, Helwa's other activities include running a network of Islamic kindergartens and childcare centres (Tadika/Taman Asuhan Kanak-Kanak Islam, TASKI), a women's domestic abuse shelter in Shah Alam (in the Selangor state) and a shelter home for unwed pregnant girls in Ampang (in the Kuala Lumpur district) called Rumah Perlindungan Wanita Bayt Al Rahmah (House of Mercy Women's Shelter). Helwa also regularly engages with multiracial women's groups in inter-racial and inter-faith activities in order to promote greater understanding between the different racial groups.

2.3.3.2: Wanita IKRAM

Wanita IKRAM is the women's wing of Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM is an Arabic word that means honour). IKRAM was formed in 2009 and it has its roots with another Islamic revivalist group called Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia (Congregation of Islamic Reform, JIM), which was formed in 1990. JIM was dissolved after an internal disagreement between members. Many of the former JIM members established IKRAM in 2009 by combining with smaller Islamic humanitarian groups. The other members set up the Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity, ISMA), which is known for its Malay-centric and rigid Islamic views. Since then, IKRAM positions itself as a moderate Islamic group that adopts a path of *wasatiyyah* (middle way). Wanita IKRAM was officially established in 2010, and there is a continuity with the activities IKRAM women activists undertook under JIM. Wanita IKRAM runs a teenage shelter house, *Raudhatus Sakinah* (Peaceful Garden) for at-risk and unwed pregnant girls, which was started in 1998 under JIM.[19] Some of the women activists are also involved with the kindergartens and Islamic schools under IKRAM's educational arm, IKRAM MUSLEH.[20] As part of the group's *wasatiyyah* ethos, Wanita IKRAM actively engages with non-Muslim women's groups in inter-racial and inter-faith activities. At the time of the research for the thesis in 2020-21, a key Wanita IKRAM leader was also the secretary-general of the multiracial women's coalition, NCWO. One interlocuter from Wanita IKRAM estimated that its women members accounted for 65% of IKRAM's 24K members. Wanita IKRAM works on several matters pertaining to women and the family – one of its more recent campaigns is on *kebapaan* (fatherhood), educating Muslim men on their responsibilities to the family. This new women-led campaign marks a shift from its previous focus on Muslim women and children only.

2.3.4: Islamic Feminism

2.3.4.1: Sisters in Islam

SIS is the only formally registered Muslim women's group in Malaysia that relies extensively on Islamic feminist scholarship in its advocacy work. SIS publishes and disseminates feminist

[19] Raudhatus Sakinah, https://www.raudhatussakinah.com.my/tentangkami/, last retrieved on Jan 14, 2022.
[20] IKRAM Musleh run 57 kindergartens, 38 primary schools and 18 secondary schools in Malaysia (https://musleh.edu.my/sekolah-ikram-musleh/, last retrieved on Jan 14, 2022).

ideas from a Muslim perspective in collaboration with international academics. SIS is also well known for its work on the international stage; it is involved with Musawah (equality in Arabic), a global movement advocating for human rights of women in Muslim societies. In Malaysia, SIS provides a free legal clinic (Telenisa) for Muslim women to obtain information on Islamic law matters. By the late 1990s, SIS expanded its advocacy from women's rights to include issues of freedom of religion and freedom of expression. However, SIS increasingly faces criticism from the Islamic bureaucracies over whether it has the appropriate religious credentials to speak on Islamic issues. The Malaysian state securitised the group's advocacy as deviant and threatening to public order and social cohesion; SIS continues to challenge in the civil courts a 2014 *fatwa* by the Selangor Islamic department that proscribed it as religiously deviant (Saleem 2018). These challenges make it difficult for SIS to gain ground within the Malay community. One interlocuter notes that many within the Malay community view SIS as Islamophobic for raising questions that are regarded as challenging Islam itself. On the other hand, the interlocuter notes that the pro-secularists in Malaysia claim that SIS reinforces Islamism. Despite its long history of activism, its membership is small at 44 members; it has an affiliate category called Friends of SIS for those who want to stay connected with the group's activities but not as members. SIS allies with secular feminists on joint advocacy work on women's and human rights, for example through the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG).

2.4: Conclusion

The postcolonial theorist Chatterjee argues that the condition of colonialism often brought about two contradictory movements during the state-building period in postcolonial countries wherein modern development objectives were pursued in the political domain and cultural particularity in the domestic domain (1993). As this chapter showed, these contradictory movements were apparent in the postcolonial Malaysian context, shaping the distinctive ideological orientations of women's groups. The Islamic women activists from the Islamic revivalist *dakwah* groups responded to rapid social changes from the state's development projects by upholding Islam as cultural and religious bulwarks against secularism. As more women attained formal education, and entered the workforce in newly independent Malaysia, women activists pushed to expand legal protections for women. Many of these women's groups were comprised of non-Malays, and they were inspired by secular feminist ideals. The feminist

groups stayed away from religious discourse and instead cultivated secular multiracial spaces for their advocacy work. In response to injustice within the Islamic courts, Muslim women advocated for gender equality through rereading Islamic texts with a feminist lens. The ideological divergence of these different women's groups became more pronounced in a context complicated by toxic ethnic politics, the politicisation of Islam, and polarising culture wars. The perspectives and lived experiences of Malay women activists from the different ideological groups will likely be multiple and even conflicting in many aspects. The next chapter discusses the epistemological and methodological considerations that informed the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach established in this thesis to generate knowledge on intersections from the multiple and conflicting perspectival accounts by the Malay women on their advocacy work.

Chapter Three

A Decolonial Feminist Standpoint Research Approach: Centring Multiple Experiences of Malay Women in Malaysia

…[an] imperative born out of the realization that we can no longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of valuable human flourishings. In other words, a particular openness to exploring nonliberal traditions is intrinsic to a politically responsible scholarly practice, a practice that departs not from a position of certainty but one of risk, critical engagement, and a willingness to reevaluate one's own views in light of the Other's (Mahmood 2001)

3.1: Introduction

This chapter discusses the epistemological and methodological decolonial feminist standpoint research approach that guided the research for this thesis. The review of the literature on Malay women's activism in Chapter Two explained the historical differentiation of the women's groups along distinctive ideological lines. As such, there are also differences in how the Malay women activists address social issues through their advocacy work. Therefore, at the outset of my data-collection, I determined that the perspectives and lived experiences of Muslim women activists from the different groups would be multiple and even conflicting in many aspects. The overarching aim of my research – to investigate whether women activists from different ideological groups can trust each other enough to form cross-cutting alliances across ideological divides – necessitates the centring and critical examination of these multiple and conflicting perspectival accounts by the women. To this end, this chapter explains how I integrated beneficial elements from feminist standpoint and decolonial theories to establish a decolonial feminist standpoint research approach to generate knowledge on the possible feminist intersections from my Malay women interlocuters' multiple perspectives. The first section of this chapter discusses the usefulness of feminist standpoint theory and the feminist dilemma of discriminating between the multiplicity of standpoints. The second section highlights the areas of tension between hegemonic feminist theory and the study of Muslim women that must be accounted for when critically evaluating the standpoints from the Malay women in this research. The third section discusses key ideas from decolonial theory including decolonial feminism that addresses these tensions. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the integration of feminist standpoint and decolonial theories to analyse the Malay women's perspectives, choices, and actions through a critical lens.

3.2: Feminist Standpoint Theory

The feminist standpoint approach is a theoretical perspective developed by feminist scholars through the 1970s and 1980s to highlight the problems of androcentrism in traditional male-centred epistemologies and in dominant modes of research practice. These feminist scholars argue that research had been conducted from the vantage point of men because men have historically been in positions of power and privilege (Rose 1983; Hartsock 1987; MacKinnon 1989; Harding 1991). Men in positions of power and privilege, especially in political leadership, is still the case in many societies of the world including in postcolonial Malaysia (Bjarnegård 2013; Mohamed 2018). These androcentric biases in society are thus also embedded into research processes, which influence how research problems are posed, from how data is gathered to what theories or concepts are favoured in analysis and to the knowledge claims that are eventually produced (Harding 1991). The false assumption that the researcher is independent of the research process then can produce skewed understandings of the relationship between the institutions and structures of patriarchy, gender hierarchy and social problems. Feminist scholars point out the absurdity of claims of value-neutral research methodologies and objectivity when androcentric biases are not recognised nor accounted for in research processes (Harding 1991). Instead, feminist scholars insist that "all human beliefs – including our best scientific beliefs – are socially situated" (Harding 1991, p. 142). Hence, feminist scholars argue that research aimed at understanding and addressing problems in society such as gender inequalities or gendered social outcomes should privilege the perspectives of marginalised social groups such as women in patriarchal societies because these groups possess an epistemic advantage. This epistemic advantage comes from the standpoint of the marginalised group as the marginalised are more attuned to the social problems that affect them. This is because they are forced to live and conduct their lives with knowledge of two sets of practices in two different contexts – the context of the dominated and the context of the dominant.[21]

3.2.1: Women as Expert Knowers

One of the first feminist scholars to forward this line of thinking was sociologist Dorothy

[21] This feminist argument is similar to the concept of double consciousness first developed by sociologist W.E.B Du Bois in 1903 to explain the racialised oppression experienced by blacks in America.

Smith, who argue that the starting point for research inquiry should be in the situated and everyday experiences of women, with the recognition that there are different experiences of women in the world. Given that men's perspective of social life had become naturalised due to their dominant position in society, the male researcher finds it easy to enter the world of research without having to experience the world of concrete practical activities such as managing a household or caregiving the way women or other marginalised social groups must. In fact, he may not be aware of the daily work that the women in his life have to perform that enables him to work unencumbered by the non-research world as he does (Smith 1990). Furthermore, his way of knowing the world, which is in fact structured by gender hierarchy, fits with the existing body of knowledge (theories, concepts, and methods) that is itself historically created in a context of patriarchy. The male researcher can claim that what he studies is independent of himself as a researcher, i.e., he practices objectivity. Women researchers on the other hand experience a "bifurcation of consciousness" daily as they inhabit two worlds – the world of research where they must attend to responsibilities associated with their academic careers and the world of concrete practical activities where they must attend to matters of the household and caregiving (Smith 1987, p. 90). Having knowledge of the world of concrete practical activities that affect women and other marginalised groups in society opens women's eyes to the realisation that the claim to an external, independent, and objective view is in fact false. The dominant ways of knowing that have been naturalised through time have come from the vantage point of elite, ruling-class, white males, and are socially constructed. To function in society, men, being from the dominant group, do not have to be necessarily attuned to women's behaviours and activities to function in society in the same way that women have to be attuned to men's ways of knowing (Jaggar 2004). Therefore, Smith argues that "the only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within" (Smith 1987, p. 92).

Smith's argument was crucial in laying the foundation for an alternative approach to knowledge production, one that would help make more visible the gendered power relations in any society. Smith's approach necessitated that the researcher moves away from the traditional mode of research practice in scientific disciplines including the social sciences, where the researcher sees herself as separate from the object of study, gathers data and then attempts to fit her data into existing theoretical or conceptual boundaries. This is a research process which Smith critically termed "conceptual imperialism" since androcentrism is embedded in such practices (Smith 1987, p.88). Instead, Smith argues that the researcher should focus on

women's experiences as women themselves experience them while being reflexive about one's own location in society; that is, the recognition that the researcher's own location in society is a crucial component of how she understands the experiences of others (Smith 1987, p. 93).

Other feminist scholars bolstered the argument that there is value in adopting a feminist standpoint approach in research. By adapting the Marxist mode of critiquing class domination, political scientist Nancy Hartsock developed a feminist standpoint approach to analyse the sexual division of labour as a basis for understanding patriarchy as a structure of women's oppression. Hartsock argues that just as Marx had adopted the standpoint of the proletariat to understand the relations of domination in the category of class, feminists should adopt the standpoint of women to understand relations of domination in the category of gender. The objective of the feminist standpoint is to show that some realities of the social world on "the real relations of humans with each other and the natural world," were not visible and the task then for the researcher is to make them visible (Hartsock 1987, p. 159).

Hartsock's standpoint approach entails making five epistemological claims:

(1) material life is structured and limited by one's understanding of social life

(2) if material life is structured in an oppositional relationship for two groups (e.g., master and slave or man and woman), then the understandings of one group will be different from the other, with the consequence that the dominant group has a partial and "perverse" understanding of the dominated group

(3) the understandings of the dominant group structure all material relations, which all social groups have to participate in, and so these dominant understandings cannot be denied as false

(4) the dominated group then have to struggle to make their understandings be seen and heard because their understandings are not visible to the dominant group; the process of making others recognise the understandings of the dominated is an "achievement" because it educates society toward changing the relations between the dominant and dominated groups

(5) the standpoint of the dominated is an engaged position that "exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman" with a view toward its liberatory potential for the dominated (Hartsock 2019, p. 329).

In sum, Hartsock argues that the subordinate status of women in society placed women in a unique position to be superior knowers. Thus, starting research from the lives of women leads to knowledge claims that are "less partial and distorted" (Harding 1991, p. 185) because women's subordinate status in society and their ability to have bifurcated consciousness mean that they are less motivated to misinterpret social reality. Starting research with women's lives and perspectives then enables researchers to produce knowledge with strengthened standards of objectivity (Harding 1992).

3.2.2: Benefits of Feminist Standpoint Theory

Taken together, the feminist standpoint approach operates at three levels: as an epistemology that recognises and values women as knowers, as a methodology for doing feminist research and as a political strategy underpinned by the feminist value of undoing gender inequalities (Harding 2004). This approach aims to centre women's perspectives and lived experiences in research inquiries in order to reveal the gendered power relations and structures implicated in the social phenomena being studied. By taking this approach, the researcher adopts a distinctive feminist lens to produce knowledge that has a liberatory value for women's progress toward a more equal and fairer world.

The feminist standpoint approach is beneficial for my research focus on Malay women activists because it centres women's perspectives and lived experiences on contentious social issues in the Malaysian context where the androcentric and sexist perspectives often take prominence in the public sphere (see examples in Ridzuan and Musa 2022). As discussed in Chapter Two, from the 1970s onwards, Malay women, particularly those living in urban areas, took advantage of the Malaysian state's development initiatives including those under the pro-Malay affirmative action plan to further their tertiary studies and gain well-paying jobs. Hence, Malay women like their male counterparts progressed economically and they are today a visible part of the economy. Yet concurrently, the Islamic revivalist movement during this same period resulted in the development of an Islamic discourse that ultimately relegated

women's social roles in the public sphere as secondary to those of men whilst women's domestic roles in the private sphere were valorised and emphasised (Mohamed, Ng and Tan 2006). Consequently, Malay Muslim women who work or run their own business in Malaysia often must "bargain with patriarchy", where women juggle between their domestic duties and their work through constant negotiation with patriarchal norms that are reinforced through Islamic concepts such as giving *taat* (obedience) to husbands and seeking *izin* (permission) from husbands (Selamat and Endut 2020). In such a context then, starting with the perspectives of Malay women activists is beneficial to my research since I am interested in understanding what these activists do to forward their interests and how they exercise agency through their advocacy work under the constrained conditions of patriarchy. Their actions and perhaps their inactions too can be revealing as to the dynamics of power relations and the prospects for social change on feminist understandings in Malaysian society. Therefore, Hartsock's argument about women being superior knowers is congruent with my understanding of the Malay women activists in my study. As my research interlocuters, the Malay women are indeed the expert knowers of the constraints in the context they live and work in, the social problems they encounter that they aim to resolve, and the strategies they adopt to achieve their objectives in the course of the work that they do. However, the women's perspectives in and of themselves are not the feminist standpoint. Rather, their perspectives provide the ground for the feminist standpoint to emerge out of the gap between their understandings of the world and the understandings of the "dominant conceptual schemas" that structure the world (Harding 1991, p. 276). The standpoint is ultimately a critical insight "about the dominant group, its institutions, practices, and culture," that is obtained through the process of analysing women's perspectives (Harding 2003, p. 141).

3.2.3: Critique of Feminist Standpoint Theory

Despite the above-stated benefits of the feminist standpoint approach for my research, it is important to acknowledge that early conceptualisations of the approach by feminist scholars such as Smith and Hartsock had a singular focus on gender as an analytical category, which was problematic. Since the feminist standpoint approach emerged in academia in a particular time and space in the Western world to help forward the feminist social movement, it was critiqued by non-white and non-Western women for essentialising and universalising the category of women based on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, Western

women; that is, critics claimed that the approach did not account for differences between women in diverse contexts, who experience different types and degrees of oppressions or experiences of marginalisation (Mohanty 1984; Lorber 1997). This argument on the intersecting nature of multiple oppressions was first put forward by black feminist academics in the West, who emphasised that the black women's standpoint would be experienced and expressed differently by distinct groups of black women, that is, the notion that one's location in society is made up of multiple and contiguous standpoints rather than a single essentialist standpoint (Collins 1990). Later black feminist legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw argued that the gender framework should be replaced by an intersectional one to account for the ways race and gender interacted (Nash 2008). Postcolonial and Latin American feminists too emphasised that the relations of power that were reduced to merely that between the binary opposition of the dominated (women) and dominant (men) were inadequate to explain the experiences of non-white women where multiple and fluid structures of domination – i.e., race, class, sexuality, nationhood – intersect to affect women differently in different contexts (Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991; Narayan 1997). Postcolonial feminists Mohanty and Narayan used the term "third world women" distinguish non-white and non-Western women, whose diverse experiences differed from the experiences of white, middle-class, and heterosexual women living in the West (Mohanty 1991; Narayan 1997).

Furthermore, the feminist concerns of some white women in the West were then and even today are not the same as those of non-white women in the West and in non-Western postcolonial countries like Malaysia (Mohanty 1991). Yet the feminism produced by some white feminist thinkers in the West result in "high feminist norms" that tend to reinforce Western-centric ways to think and act about feminism and women's empowerment that may not be valid or beneficial in other country contexts (Spivak 1985, p. 243). The postcolonial feminist scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak termed this 'hegemonic feminist theory' that was developed primarily by white feminist scholars (Sandoval 2004). The emphasis in hegemonic feminist theory is a binary perception of gender relations "premised on a theoretical understanding of power as a system of domination based on the hierarchical divisions between the category of women and the category of men" (de los Reyes and Mulinari 2020, p. 185). Hence, in hegemonic feminist theory, concerns over inequality between men and women take primacy over other forms of inequality concerns. Non-western feminist academics caution against the assumption that the theories and perspectives of white Western feminists have universal validity for all feminists and that the failure of some white Western feminists to recognise that they possess epistemic

privilege would result in their participation in the "dominance that Western culture has exercised over non-Western cultures," (Narayan 2004, p. 219).

3.2.4: Multiplicity of Standpoints and the Feminist Dilemma

The recognition that there was a challenge in incorporating difference between women in feminist theory was driven largely by the critique from postcolonial, black, and Latin American feminists. Furthermore, this critique occurred in a context where the postmodern paradigm shift in the social science fields saw truth being conceptualised as situated and discursive where before it was regarded as objective and real. This shift led to a reformulation of the standpoint theory to acknowledge the multiple and different accounts coming from the vantage points of women in diverse contexts. In their reformulated version, the feminist standpoint approach is regarded as an "epistemology of partial perspectives" because situated knowledge being located in a particular time and space is ultimately partial and yet illuminative toward a deeper understanding of the whole (Haraway 2004). For feminist philosopher Harding, every standpoint is a "critically and theoretically constructed discursive position" that required robust reflexivity on the part of the researcher to examine her own social location as well as that of the group being studied (Harding 1998, p. 17).

Yet if the researcher was to accept that there are multiple standpoints and that realities are socially constructed, as one rightly should given the above-mentioned legitimate criticisms, then that creates the dilemma of how the researcher should discriminate between the multiplicity of these standpoints (Hekman 1997). On one hand, there is a concern about cultural relativism as the researcher discriminates between standpoints. On the other hand, by not being discriminating, one's research may not contribute to the feminist objective of progressing women's empowerment for a more equal and fairer world. Harding's solution is to argue that researchers should engage in a "critical evaluation to determine which social situations" would generate the "most objective claims" (Harding 1991, p. 142). This critical evaluation would be subject to a "metanarrative that provides standards for cross-cultural judgments", which feminist scholars like Martha Nussbaum and Susan Moller Okin ground in the notion of human rights (Hekman 1997, p. 359). However, even this argument is critiqued because standpoint theory's emphasis on the epistemic advantage of some marginalised groups over others effectively entails "a ranking of different [knowledge] systems" which is a form of "epistemic

relativism" (Ashton 2020, p. 70). Therefore, if standpoints from multiple marginalised groups are understood to be unique and equally valid, it may discourage the researcher from searching for commonalities in the collective experiences of women. It does appear then that critical evaluation toward building knowledge claims from research would depend on who gets to define the form and content of the feminist metanarrative by which the multiplicity of women's standpoints is sorted and assessed.

The plurality of women's experiences in feminist theory is now accounted for through analytical frameworks such as postcolonial feminism, intersectionality and more recently the concept of solidarity in transnational feminism (Crenshaw 1989; Mohanty 2003; Khader 2019). However, I contend that there are still good reasons to critically evaluate the content of the feminist metanarrative itself and the reflexivity of the researcher in relation to this metanarrative when studying Muslim women in Muslim-majority postcolonial countries as feminist theory is still heavily rooted in the Western secular and liberal intellectual tradition where religion is relegated to the private sphere and individual rights and autonomy are valorised. However, in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia, religious rights and community rights are matters of public concern for state and society and often take precedence over individual rights (Daniels 2017; Moustafa 2018). I contend that my task is to avoid relying on what Spivak critically termed hegemonic feminist theory and any of its derivatives that focus solely on gender as an analytical category as the standard for critical evaluation as to do so would obscure possible insights that may be gleaned through my research on Malay women activists in Malaysia.

3.3: Tensions Between Hegemonic Feminist Theory and the Study of Muslim Women

I identify here four main areas of tension between hegemonic feminist theory and the study of Muslim women that I argue must be accounted for when critically evaluating the standpoints from the Malay women interlocuters in this research. The areas of tension arise from the following viewpoints in hegemonic feminist theory: (1) religions are viewed as inherently patriarchal institutions (2) women's agency is conceptualised in terms of resistance and subversion (3) Muslim women are homogenised as non-agentic and victimised persons (4) secular and liberal norms are viewed as central to women's empowerment. I discuss below why these viewpoints become problematic when uncritically applied to the study of Muslim

women.

3.3.1: Religions as Inherently Patriarchal Institutions

Some Western feminists have difficulty engaging with women who are religious because they tend to regard religions as inherently patriarchal institutions that treat women as unequal to men, even though many women around the world may perceive themselves as both feminists and religious (Salem 2013; Khader 2019; Giorgi 2021). Indeed, as the empirical chapters later show, many of the Malay women interlocuters in this research profess to be both practicing Muslims and feminists. Are these women lesser feminists because they choose to adhere to a religion with mainstream teachings that appears to be oppositional to the feminist goal of gender equality? Even for the few (from the Islamic revivalist groups) who do not accept the label feminist because they say they are focused on religious-based Islamic activism, they nevertheless describe themselves as engaged in work to champion women's rights and women's empowerment. They also express a desire to see more women in positions of power and decision-making in Malaysia. Some of the women engaged in this form of religious-based activism may even defend the notion of a male as the head and protector of the family by relying on the Islamic concepts of *qiwāmah* (male's responsibility to look after wife and family) and *wilāyah* (husband and wife as protectors of each other). From the vantage point of hegemonic feminist theory though, Muslim women defending male authority in the family is antithetical to the feminist goal of working for equality between men and women. Such a feminist metanarrative rooted in the Western secular and liberal intellectual tradition would dismiss religious women who choose to abide by rather than challenge the patriarchal religious structures that uphold male dominance and authority, especially in matters of the family. Then the actions of women activists in Islamic revivalist groups who are engaged in meaningful work to empower women are not given fair weight in feminist analysis. Therefore, the standard by which researchers critically evaluate whether the actions of these women are aligned or misaligned with feminist principles matters.

3.3.2 Women's Agency Conceptualised as Resistance and Subversion

The standard for critical evaluation that some feminists rely on from feminist theory is often the concept of feminist agency. However, agency as conceptualised in feminist theory does not

always capture the practices of Muslim women that can lead to meaningful social change toward women's empowerment. In most studies of Muslim women, the analyses conceptualise feminist agency in the expressions and moments where the Muslim women either resist or subvert gender hierarchies and male authority (Mahmood 2005). That is, a woman's agency is exercised in her awareness and recognition of the impact of limiting social influences, in her development of alternative and beneficial meanings of self-identity, and in her opposition to structures of social and political constraints (Abrams 1990). According to feminist theory then, Muslim women possess agency only when they are in a state of resistance or subversion (Mahmood 2005).

In Mahmood's seminal work on Egyptian Muslim women, she argues that feminist researchers have moved away from previous explanations – i.e., that false consciousness prevents women from seeing their true subordinate or oppressed state (Okin 1994) or that women adopt an adaptive preference due to the internalisation of patriarchal norms through socialisation (Nussbaum 2000) – to account for the global phenomenon of an increased number of Muslim women in Islamic social movements (Mahmood 2005). Yet some feminist researchers are flummoxed because agency as conceptualised in terms of resistance and subversion in the secular and liberal intellectual tradition cannot explain why Muslim women then would willingly support religious-based social movements that are patriarchal in nature. Mahmood argues that the tendency to focus on agency overlooks the desire of those Muslim women who choose to submit to recognised forms of religious authority and religious teachings. By overlooking the perspectives and lived experiences of these Muslim women though, we miss out on important elements of social change. Mahmood's work showed that agency could be conceived differently. The agentic processes whereby Muslim women proactively entered previously male-dominated public spaces such as mosques entailed them using the very same religious discourses that in the past had relegated them subordinate to men (Mahmood 2005). Instead, through these religious discourses, Muslim women cultivated feminine virtues such as shyness, modesty, and humility, which enabled them to develop for themselves a more public role in the religious and political spheres (Mahmood 2005). Rather than a strategic move on the part of these Muslim women to resist or subvert male dominance and authority, Mahmood argues, their agency was made visible through their choice to submit to their religion and perform actions that they perceived to be their religious obligations – for example, to veil and to study religious texts in the mosques in their quest to be better Muslims.

The point is, while all choices occur within power structures or hegemonic systems and ideals, certain women's choices are viewed by some feminists from the secular and liberal intellectual tradition as emancipatory while others are viewed as oppressive (Salem 2013). Certainly, given hegemonic feminist theory's emphasis on the power imbalance between men and women, Muslim women who willingly support religious-based social movements that are patriarchal in nature could be easily dismissed as making non-agentic choices that have little impact on the feminist goal of progressing women's empowerment.

Not only does this feminist viewpoint obscure the deeper meanings of Muslim women's choices and actions that are not always motivated by an individualistic desire for more autonomy in their lives, but it also reproduces the dominance of Western culture over the non-Western cultures that postcolonial feminists had cautioned against. Like the Egyptian Muslim women in Mahmood's study, my Malay women interlocuters from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM see themselves as part of a larger Islamic social movement whose overarching mission is to educate Muslim citizens on Islamic principles that they believe will help build a Malaysian society that is just and fair. It would be problematic to assume that my interlocuters are simply reproducing conditions for their subordination simply because they emphasise religious education when they are also actively carving space for themselves in the public sphere through their activism work. Instead, based on Foucault's arguments on power and subject formation, the religious structures that secure women's subordinate status can also be "the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (Mahmood 2005, p. 17). As Mahmood showed in her work, Muslim women do have capacity to effect positive change in social norms (in this case, the increased presence of women in the public sphere) even when they submit to religion.

3.3.3 Muslim Women Homogenised as Non-Agentic and Victimised Persons

The construct of a homogenous and monolithic category of third world women as victims that postcolonial feminists critiqued (Mohanty 1984) is still a problem in feminist theorising when it comes to the characterisation of Muslim women in Muslim-majority postcolonial countries as non-agentic and victimised persons. Historically, this characterisation of Muslim (and non-Western) women was used to justify invasions of lands in the Global South by the colonising powers on the basis that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988,

p. 296). Not only does this characterisation dehumanise women through the reductive homogenisation of a diverse group of women, but it also constructs Muslim men as oppressors of Muslim women. The post 9/11 public discourse of the "good" and "bad" Muslim has resurrected the image of the helpless Muslim woman, who is oppressed by Muslim men as a consequence of her feminine gender, class, family, culture, religion and state institutions, and she needs help from Western saviours (Mamdani 2002; Abu-Lughod 2002). Hence, the portrayal of Muslim women as victims and Muslim men as their oppressors is a form of neo-colonisation by Western powers, who instrumentalise the logics of hegemonic feminism to 'save' Muslim women (Ayotte and Husain 2005; Abu-Lughod et al 2022). Despite the advancement of intersectionality in feminist theory, there is still a persistent tendency for some feminists to analyse oppression in the category of gender in isolation, and without consideration for differences of race, religion, class, age, and nationality when studying women's experiences in the non-Western world (Castro 2021).

My interlocuters are women, Malay, and Muslim, who live in Malaysia. Yet as discussed in Chapter Two, notwithstanding their ideological leanings, there are also other distinct differences between them. Their social locations differ based on their age, class, profession, and education. Furthermore, they navigate a politically polarised context and have differential access with stakeholders (i.e., international organisations; government officials; religious leaders; male activists from their own group; female activists from other groups; and girls and women in the communities they serve) in their activism work. Their awareness, perceptions, and experiences of oppressions will differ based on their social location and access to social capital resources such as education, career, and other networking avenues and opportunities. Hence, is imperative to account for the social location of my interlocuters that shapes their experiences and understandings rather than seeing them as one homogenised group that differ only on the basis of ideology and/or patriarchal culture. In other words, it is also important to recognise that there is diversity among Malay women.

3.3.4 Secular and Liberal Norms as Central to Women's Empowerment

Since hegemonic feminist theory is rooted in the secular and liberal intellectual tradition of the West, it can reinforce the coloniality of secularism. The coloniality of secularism is the Western-centric notion that secularism is a natural consequence of modernity; a lingering

colonial-era premise that worldviews and knowledges of the non-West are ontologically inferior, which confirms the superior modern secular outlook in present times (Miro 2020). During colonisation, feminism was seen as civilising mission to serve the colonialist enterprise; in the modern era, feminism supports the notion of a Western superiority over the non-West and the idea of the Western secular and liberal society as central to upholding women's rights and freedoms (Vergès 2019; Khader 2019). Today, the notion of human rights is widely interpreted by most people in the West to be a universal standard that is secular in basis and in which individual autonomy is central. As a universal standard, many hold that secular human rights should be prioritised over all other values including religious values, even if at a philosophical level there is no real valid argument for according priority to either secular or religious/cultural values (Freeman 2004). From the viewpoint of hegemonic feminist theory, the spread of secular and liberal norms to the non-West through the human rights discourse is a necessary step in the effort to progress women's rights and their empowerment.

By the 1980s, as women made advances in academia and in the corporate world in the West, a civilising feminist machinery was built and propagated through state development policies, international institutions, and non-profit organisations, which implemented development and monetary aid programs in postcolonial countries of the Global South (Vergès 2019). Feminists, who were involved in women's empowerment programs that were set up to address the feminisation of poverty brought about by capitalist expansions, tended to prop up state policies of pacification and control in the Global South (Vergès 2019). For example, poor women in the Global South were targets for micro-credit programs in the 1990s on the assumption that this would help empower them and alleviate female poverty (Isserles 2003; Kumar 2013). Yet this has not been the outcome for many women; women's empowerment programs do not necessarily contribute to women's social and political progress when they fail to address the exploitative underpinnings of capitalism that impact access to health, education, and land rights in the Global South (Vergès 2019; Castro 2021).[22] However, through these international institutions and non-profit organisations, Western feminists forward a depoliticised human rights discourse that is adopted by non-Western women through educational and women's empowerment programs (Vergès 2019). The depoliticised human rights discourse is problematic because feminist groups in postcolonial countries become dependent on the

[22] Women in the West are not free from such struggles either. Fraser argues that while second-wave feminism in the West may have succeeded in a cultural revolution because feminist ideas are socially accepted, these ideas have yet to be translated into structural changes due to the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism (Fraser 2009).

resources and funding by these international institutions, non-profit organisations based in the West, and governments from the West, which tend to prioritise the universal human rights approach to problems affecting women over locally rooted approaches (Castro 2021). In the process, non-Western women lose their own voices when gender policies are advanced via a top-down approach, without engagement and input by women at the grassroots level, even though there is evidence that shows bottom-up approaches developed in conjunction with input by women in different sectors of the grassroots are far more effective (Castro 2021).

Therefore, the coloniality of secularism is actualised today through a Western-constructed essentialist approach to women's rights promulgated through the human rights discourse. This approach divides the world between cultures that are open to women's rights and gender equality and cultures that are not (Vergès 2019). Therefore, patriarchy in a Muslim-majority postcolonial country like Malaysia is viewed as inherent, possibly irredeemable, and far worse than the patriarchy in the Western world. Under a hegemonic feminist theory rooted in the secular and liberal intellectual tradition, religions and traditions are thought of as identity markers that are static and bounded while modernity is secular and the basis for ongoing progress (Miro 2020). However, this sets up a reactive hierarchical relationship where the secular-modern sphere is viewed in opposition to the religion-tradition sphere in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia. This oppositional relationship is ultimately an effect of coloniality, which is implicated in the present-day polarisation in Malaysia and evident in the way the Malay women from the secular and religious-oriented groups self-identify as being ideologically different. Coloniality's hierarchical dichotomies and logics are so pervasive in the modern era that feminists can feel compelled to adhere to secular logics for fear of engaging in cultural relativism and empowering patriarchy. This could place pressure on non-Western women (and that includes the non-Western researchers like myself who are formally educated in the Western intellectual tradition while identifying as Muslim) to conform to a Western-centric conception of what comprises meaningful progress on women's empowerment when determining (or assessing in the case of the researcher) the parameters of reform in activism work.

In this sub-section, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the value of the feminist standpoint approach in centring the multiplicity of Muslim women's perspectives and experiences in my research approach and data analysis. I also identified four main areas of tension between hegemonic feminist theory that is rooted in the Western secular and liberal intellectual tradition

and the study of Muslim women, which should be accounted for. Addressing these tensions is important because critical evaluation is a situated practice that is never a completely objective task as the evaluation is dependent on what is considered normative in a particular field of study (Mahmood 2004). As a researcher studying Malay women activists in Malaysia, I would have to be careful not to apply the normative standards of a hegemonic feminism that is rooted in the Western secular and liberal intellectual tradition to analyse the perspectives and lived experiences of Malay Muslim women in Malaysia.

3.4: Decolonial Theory

The overarching aim of the decolonial theoretical paradigm is to de-centre forms of Western-centric thought as the only possible framework for knowledge production (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). This section discusses key ideas developed by scholars working from the decolonial theoretical paradigm that are relevant to the study of Muslim women in postcolonial Muslim-majority countries: (1) coloniality of power and knowledge (2) racialisation of Muslims through religious difference (3) decolonial feminism.

3.4.1: Coloniality of Power and Knowledge

The decolonial school of thought arose through the works of several scholars from South America – notably, sociologists Anibal Quijano and María Lugones and the philosopher and semiotician Walter D. Mignolo (Bhambra 2014).[23] Central in this body of work is the notion of coloniality of power – that is, the prevailing political, economic and social structures of modernity were formed during the era of modern colonialism (beginning from the European conquest of the Americas in 1492 through to the conquests of Indonesia in the 17th century, India in the 18th century and the Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian and African continents in the 19th century) during which the European coloniser group imposed the idea that European thought and knowledge was superior, rational and universal so as to relegate the non-European colonised groups of people in the rest of the world as inferior and in need of saving (Quijano 2000). This idea was actualised through the creation of the social category of race as a key

[23] There is a lot of work on decolonial theory beyond South America which has been produced in Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa in particular. However, the discussion here focuses primarily on work from the South American decolonial school of thought as one of the key proponents of decolonial theory.

element of hierarchical difference between the colonisers who were positioned as superior to the colonised groups (Quijano 2000). As Chapter Two highlighted, the racial hierarchical difference was harnessed by colonisers for their capitalist pursuits – for example, in Malaysia, British colonials channelled the Malays, Indians and Chinese into different economic sectors (Hirschman 1986).

The logic of coloniality in racial capitalism underpinned by the historical legacy of European/Western colonial power is constantly being reproduced and updated under the rhetoric of modernity and progress in ways that maintain unequal social hierarchies and power differentials in postcolonial countries, even though explicit colonialism as a political order has long come to an end (Mignolo 2011). For example, the concept of race is colonial in origin yet race as a hierarchical social classification has proven to be more stable in postcolonial countries today than when it first emerged under colonialism (Quijano 2000). Coloniality functions through control over key domains that structure modern societies – political authority via the nation-state; production and exploitation of labour via capitalism; sexuality via the family unit; and worldviews via Western-centrism – wherein the binary hierarchical categorisation of *superior* West and the *inferior* rest persists (Quijano 2007).

Crucially, the coloniality of power is intimately linked with the coloniality of knowledge, which highlights the added issue of an imposition of a European/Western "provincialism as universalism" (Quijano 2007, p. 177). The production of knowledge during the colonial milieu was predicated by particularised understandings of European history but these were propagated by the colonisers as universal understandings and as a linear system of social and economic development through time, with the consequence that "history was conceived as an evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational; from proto-capitalism to capitalism" (Quijano 2007, p. 176). Europe saw itself as the "advanced form of the history of the entire species" (Quijano 2007, p. 176). As such, the European colonisers at first expropriated indigenous knowledge in the lands they controlled while denying the colonised opportunities for their own production of knowledge, and later, European thought and knowledge was imposed onto the colonised while the indigenous modes of thought and knowledge were silenced or destroyed (Mignolo 2007). The destruction of indigenous thought and knowledge was instrumental in the colonisers' depiction of the colonised as *inferior* beings (Fanon 1963). With this notion of coloniality of power, the decolonial school of thought stresses that the ways in which we think and live in

the world today were actually shaped during the colonial milieu and continue to be shaped by the prevailing structures of coloniality in modern societies. Simply put, the decolonial school of thought views modernity as the mask for coloniality.

3.4.2: Racialisation of Muslims Through Religious Difference

The decolonial school of thought emphasises race as a structuring principle in the coloniality of power and knowledge. However, religious difference is also implicated as it additionally serves to create a hierarchical difference between the West and the Muslim non-West. During the encounters between the European Christian and Islamic empires, Muslims were categorised as "people without the right God"; this changed to "people with the wrong religion" as Christian Europe underwent progressive waves of secularisation from the late 15th century onwards and Europeans began to see themselves as part of a superior, unique, rational, and scientific European civilisation (Grosfuguel and Mielants 2006, p. 4). This period represented an important turn in European discourse from the "inferiorization of Islam" to the "inferiorization of Muslims", who practiced Islam (Grosfuguel and Mielants 2006, p. 4). Therefore, the Orientalist misrepresentation of Muslims during colonialism that manifest today as Islamophobia stems from this historical relationship between the Europe/West and the Muslim world from the time of the Crusades through to the colonial encounter wherein the non-Western Muslim *other* was reproduced in each new guise from the Saracen to the Moor to the Turk (Said 1978; Ali 2017). In fact, arguably Christian identity and later European/Western identity was constructed antagonistically in relation to Islam and Muslims as the enemy (Mastnak 1994). This historically antagonistic relationship serves the basis for the racialisation of the Muslim 'Other' whose habits, beliefs, behaviours, and values are categorised as inferior and fixed (Grosfuguel and Mielants 2006).

The very categorisation of Islam as religion rather than a living, breathing and evolving tradition is a colonial construct. The categorisation of Islam as religion had served imperial and later colonial ambitions to domesticate and control Muslim-majority regions by relegating Islam, which was and is the fabric of Muslims' lived experiences, to the private sphere (Asad 1993; Sayyid 1997). As Cavanaugh notes, this historically constituted binary categorisation of the European/Western *us* and the Muslim *other*/*them* still endures today:

> The idea that religion has a peculiar tendency to promote violence depends on the ability to distinguish religion from what is not religion – the secular, in other words. [However,] there is no *essential* difference between religious and secular ... These are invented categories, not simply the way things are [and] these categories were invented in the modern West ... The myth of religious violence promotes a dichotomy between *us* in the secular West who are rational and peacemaking, and *them*, the hordes of violent religious fanatics in the Muslim world. *Their* violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. *Our* violence, on the other hand, is secular, rational, and peacemaking. And so we find ourselves regrettably forced to bomb them into the higher rationality. (Cavanaugh 2014, p.487 quoted in Ali 2017).

Therefore, the creation and application of the social category of religion in colonised Muslim-majority regions was also another key element of hierarchical difference between the *superior* colonisers and the *inferior* colonised Muslim groups. In the postcolonial context, the spread of secular ideology, which is based on particularised understandings of European historical experience and yet framed as universally applicable, pushes Muslims to contain their experience of Islam in three ways: (1) while religiosity is seen as an individual right and an autonomous choice, it must be relegated to the private sphere; (2) religious law is seen as a divinely ordained legal code that is codified rather than a living and evolving tradition; (3) and religious groups in the public sphere are seen as a public threat (Salaymeh 2021). As was argued earlier in this chapter, the depiction of Islamic tradition as static and fixed creates conditions for the coloniality of secularism in postcolonial contexts. In such a context, Huntington's enduring clash of civilisations thesis (1996) finds common ground with secular feminists, where both regard Islam as being irredeemably antagonistic to core Western secular and liberal values such as gender equality, social tolerance, and freedom of speech; therefore, *inferior* Islamic norms and values are perceived to be in continuous conflict with the *superior* secular-liberal norms and values (see Huntington 1996; Inglehart and Norris 2003).

In contrast, decolonial theorists argue that there is no singular authentic Islam, but rather several Islams that can be understood and expressed differently based on local histories and contexts (Sayyid 1997). As Sayyid argues, despite Islam's polysemy, Islam still retains its

singularity, i.e., Islam for Muslims is simply "another word for 'goodness incarnate'" and this understanding underpins Islamist movements (Sayyid 1997, p. 38). The decolonial approach recognises that the coloniality of secularism may lead a researcher to over-emphasise political machinations to explain why Islamic revivalist groups and Islamist political parties are popular in Muslim-majority countries and to under-emphasise other factors such as high levels of social trust in Islamic activists and politicians who are perceived to hold themselves accountable to a higher divine power and hence less likely to engage in corrupt activities, a phenomenon in Muslim-majority countries referred to as the "Islamist advantage" (Cammett and Luong 2014).

3.4.3: Decolonial Feminism

Using the concept of coloniality of power-knowledge, decolonial feminists emphasise that feminism during the colonial era – variously termed civilisational feminism or colonial feminism (see Verges 2019; Castro 2021) – is implicated today in the gender equality projects that are pushed by international organisations and feminist groups in the Global South without adequate consideration for other pertinent intersecting factors such as race, class, and sexuality. The singular focus on gender equality projects is a form of top-down feminism that excludes the voices of many racialised women using an essentialist approach to human rights and women's rights (Castro 2021). As highlighted in the previous section on coloniality of secularism, decolonial feminists emphasise that a Western-constructed notion of universal rights only reinforces the colonial hierarchical category of the *superior* West and the *inferior* non-West, wherein people in the non-West must be "educated out of their 'savagery'" by teaching them about their universal rights (Castro 2021, p. 11). The decolonial feminist approach then is to "draw on theories and practices that women have forged over time" while attending to the structures of racism, capitalism and coloniality (Verges 2019, p. 24).

While feminist scholars highlight the multiplicity of women's experiences that are dependent on their social location, decolonial feminist scholars also emphasise that there is a multiplicity of selves within one racialised woman, i.e., the idea that a woman can occupy and move between "multiple social locations and [experience] a condition of in-betweenness" (Ortega 2016, p. 65). Lugones uses the concept of world-traveling to make the argument that women traverse multiple social worlds daily, and in doing so, they experience a state of unease (Lugones 2003). This state of unease is a liminal space between different social worlds where

a woman becomes aware of her own multiplicity, which allows for solidarity to be built between diverse women (Lugones 2010). Ortega argues that this movement between social worlds makes a woman more reflective of her own actions, which can contribute to the modification of her norms and practices (Ortega 2016). Ortega's idea of movement between social worlds builds on Anzaldúa's earlier concept of borderlands as cultural spaces where people navigate multiple identities and negotiate differences to form new forms of identities and cultures (Anzaldúa 1987). As Anzaldúa puts it, borderlands are also associated "with states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another" (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 77).

The decolonial feminists' idea of multiplicity of selves and movement across social worlds recognises that women activists' perspectives, choices, and actions may not always stem from a purely ideological stance regardless of one's membership in an ideological group. The women activists' actions may not be visible in the public sphere as they may be infra-political in nature, i.e., their acts, thoughts, and gestures under constraints of oppressive structures such as authoritarianism, patriarchy, and racism are not meant to be an overt form of political action but instead may be discreet and under the radar of the public eye (see Scott 1990). The infra-political can be located in the routines of everyday life of women (Lugones 2010). For example, Castro notes that women who are not active in the political sphere can nevertheless be agentic actors in shaping social realities in their communities by re-constructing "social geographies that help them navigate power structures enacted through gendered expectations and hierarchies" (Castro 2021, p. 44).[24]

3.5: Integrating Feminist Standpoint and Decolonial Theories

In sum, the decolonial approach is to interrogate and to delink from the coloniality of power and knowledge and the racialisation of Muslims to engage in an epistemic reconstitution of the "silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternized knowledges and languages" in postcolonial countries that were disavowed under the names of modernity and rationality (Mignolo 2007, p. 451). This thesis integrates the feminist standpoint theory's emphasis on centring multiple women's perspectives and the decolonial paradigm's emphasis on

[24] For example, Muslim women in rural Pakistan exercise their agency within the larger structures of patriarchy by relying on tight-knit social relationships and community networks to share care-giving responsibilities and chores so that they can earn more money for themselves and their children (Ahmed 2020).

recognising the multiplicity of valid knowledges to establish the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach to study and evaluate Malay Muslim women activists' perspectives, choices, and actions through a critical lens.

3.5.1: Responding to Tensions with Hegemonic Feminist Theory

The decolonial feminist standpoint research approach addresses the four tensions between hegemonic feminist theory and the study of Muslim women that were highlighted earlier. First, the research approach offers a critique of the modern structures, institutions, and mechanisms that reproduce unequal power relations and reinforce coloniality while holding to an overarching ethos of engaging with plural worldviews and knowledges on equal terms. Engaging on equal terms means setting aside uneasiness when religious women defend male authority in the family. The approach recognises that Muslims are racialised through religious differences, so engaging on equal terms also means recognising Islam as a living, evolving and dynamic tradition rather than the essentialist, static, and fixed view of Islam that is a colonial-era and orientalist conception (Miro´ 2020). As such, engaging on equal terms means recognising that Muslim women's intellectual movement across social worlds may not always stem from a purely ideological stance regardless of one's membership in an ideological group.

Second, hegemonic feminist theory conceptualises women's agency as resistance or subversion while the decolonial feminist standpoint approach theorises that the multiplicity of women's standpoints between women and within the singular woman presents possibilities for intersections of feminist understandings in the liminal space between social worlds, which are enacted in the everyday routine of life (Lugones 2010). Therefore, women's agentic choices and acts do not need to be overtly resisting or subverting for them to contribute to meaningful social change. By recognising that women's agentic choices do not need to be overtly political, the decolonial feminist standpoint approach also addresses the third tension wherein feminist theorising still has a problem with the homogenisation of Muslim women as victimised and non-agentic beings. The researcher is better able to locate the agentic choices of Muslim women through their infra-political actions that could possibly lead to meaningful social change rather than viewing them as passive and non-agentic actors.

Fourth, because the decolonial feminist standpoint approach accepts the plurality of knowledges rather than universal knowledge, it also recognises that no single feminism will solve all problems. This recognition mitigates the problem of coloniality of secularism where secular feminist logics and norms are valorised over locally rooted approaches to women's issues. The decolonial feminist standpoint approach is better able to recognise and interrogate the incommensurable differences between the plurality of knowledges because it is through these differences that opportunities for solidarities lie (Tuck and Wang 2012). Hence, the researcher is more attuned to study spaces between the different social worlds of the Malay women activists, where important work may be occurring via bottom-up and localised grassroots approaches.

3.5.2: Caveats

There are caveats though that need to be considered when using the decolonial feminist standpoint approach to critically evaluate the perspectives and experiences of Malay women activists. First, it is important to recognise that the decolonial stance can be misappropriated by pro-nativist politicians and activists to further their own political agendas (Moosavi 2020; Persard 2021). For example, the right-wing Hindutva movement in India deployed decolonial rhetoric to fuel Hindu nationalist fervour that resulted in the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narenda Modi, the BJP-led government's policies exacerbated gender-based and Islamophobic violence against women and Muslims (Kaul 2018). The misappropriation of the decolonial stance has also occurred in Malaysia, where the Islamic group ISMA (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, Malaysian Muslim Solidarity) and ISMA-led MACSA (Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations) misused anti-colonial and decolonising idioms to justify their racist and exclusivist pro-Malay positions (Hew and Chan 2021).

As previously argued in the above sections, the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach can regard Islamism as a form of religiously informed politics – that is, the research approach can recognise that Islamic revivalist groups utilise Islamic conceptions of and aspirations for the good life in order to oppose the coloniality of power and knowledge imposed

through the legacies of colonialism (Sayyid 1997).[25] However, authoritarianism and its attendant nation-building imperatives persist in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia. For example, the Malay political elites' imperative to forge a homogenous Malay Muslim populace to hold onto political power in Malaysia's competitive authoritarian political system. Therefore, the decolonial feminist standpoint lens should critically interrogate whether the perspectives of Malay women activists from the Islamic revivalist groups are also influenced by the state's own imperatives for power.

Second, decolonial feminist theorising emphasises feminist solidarity but this has the effect of erasing the difference(s) between women. Persard cautions that this emphasis only "produces a fictitious unified subjectivity among people of colour who seem to be all oppressed by white supremacy, without regard to the ways in which inter-group and intra-group violence masquerades under decolonial ambitions" (Persard 2021, p. 15). Therefore, while the decolonial feminist standpoint lens critically interrogates the in-between spaces of the Malay Muslim women activists' social worlds where meaningful intersections may be forged, it is also important to acknowledge and highlight the areas of non-intersecting differences.

3.5.3: Decolonial Feminist Standpoint Research Approach Praxis

The decolonial feminist standpoint research approach promotes a form of critical evaluation which interrogates why and how the Malay Muslim activists are re-constructing and re-appropriating their own traditions to reclaim them in new ways, and in doing so maintain their traditions' relevance in the present (Daifallah 2019).

In its praxis, the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach necessitates that the researcher adopts the following key principles:

(1) to recognise the social situatedness of both knowledge production and scholarly critique
(2) to centre women activists' voices from the different groups – secular, Islamic feminist, and Islamist – in the data collection

[25] By contrast, the dominant view of Islamism in world politics is negative because of Islamism's association with backwardness, violence, and terrorism (Hamid 2015).

(3) to adhere to strengthened standards of objectivity by being attuned to record the differences and commonalities that are encountered within and between the different women activists
(4) to examine the activism praxis of the women activists – i.e., their perspectives and their practices that guide specific actions in their advocacy work to empower women
(5) to interrogate the in-between liminal spaces where intersections of feminist understandings may be made visible through the activism praxis of the Malay Muslim women activists
(6) to interrogate the complex structures, institutions, and processes that maintain coloniality, patriarchy and postcolonial authoritarian state
(7) to constantly practice reflexive self-evaluation to unlearn precepts of coloniality that may otherwise obscure the ability to recognise valid and plural knowledges and worldviews
(8) to recognise the women activists as expert knowers and co-engaged in knowledge production with me, which warrants sharing with them the research findings[26]

3.6: Conclusion

The two important epistemological considerations that I operationalised to establish the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach stem from feminist standpoint theory and the decolonial school of thought. The feminist standpoint theory aims to account for the effects of androcentrism in patriarchal societies while the decolonial school of thought aims to account for the effects of Western-centrism and coloniality of secularism in postcolonial countries. Taken together, the decolonial feminist standpoint approach in my research methodology and data analysis, discussed in the next chapter, aims to generate feminist research from the cacophony of Muslim women activists' voices. As I have argued in this chapter, the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach explains the deeper significance and meanings of the power relations that underpin the differences between Muslim women activists and the possible intersections in their understandings and actions. This approach will benefit scholarly inquiries and critical evaluation of the perspectives and lived experiences of Malay Muslim women in postcolonial Muslim-majority contexts such as Malaysia. The next chapter discusses the

[26] An executive summary of the research's main findings along with the thesis will be made available to the women activists who participated in this study.

research methods and the data analysis, which uses the decolonial feminist standpoint as an analytical lens to critically examine the interrelationships between public discourse, the women activists' perspectives and their experiences, power relations and ideologies.

Chapter Four

Research Methods and Data Analysis

4.1: Introduction

This chapter details the research methods and the ethical considerations that were accounted for during the data collection of the perspectives from the Malay women activists. The research method for the data collection was semi-structured and in-depth qualitative interviews. The in-depth interviews were designed to be conservational in style and based on a deliberative democratic approach to qualitative interviewing that reflected the decolonial feminist standpoint research praxis discussed in the previous chapter. The interviewing method meant that I took steps at the outset to convey to the women that they were my interlocuters rather than subjects to be researched. The significance of the interviewing method was that the process of data collection was a two-way interactive and intimate conversation between the interlocuter(s) and me (the researcher), which allowed for a more critical line of questioning. The interviews were originally planned to be conducted face-to-face in Malaysia. However, with the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the interviews had to be conducted online because cross-border travel was not permitted, and non-essential gatherings were prohibited, and later discouraged. In all, 19 interviews were conducted online, which provided sufficient depth and variety in the perspectives that enabled me to theorise about their experiences. The interview data was coded and interpreted using critical thematic analysis where critical perspectives (based on the ideas in Chapter Three) were used to analyse the interrelationships between the interview data, social practices and power relations in the Malaysian context, and the ideological orientations of the women's groups.

The first section of the chapter discusses the participant recruitment process, the qualitative interviewing research method, and the advantages and disadvantages of online video-conferencing interviews. The second section discusses the ethical considerations that were accounted for in the study. These ethical considerations guided the development of the semi-structured qualitative interview questions and the protocol for practicing an engaged and active reflexivity during the interviews with the interlocuters, and subsequently in the data analysis. The third section outlines the process of critical thematic analysis used to code and interpret the qualitative interview data.

4.2: Research Method

4.2.1: Participant Recruitment

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the study's interlocuters were as follows: Malaysian adult[27] female citizens; self-identified as Malays and Muslims; were involved in advocacy work and/or activism on women's rights and gender issues in Malaysia for a minimum of two years; and proficient in English or Malay language. Individuals who were unable to provide informed consent were not considered for the study.

The interlocuters were recruited from the following groups:

(1) Sisters in Islam (SIS), an Islamic feminist group
(2) Helwa ABIM, women's wing of ABIM, an Islamic revivalist group
(3) Wanita IKRAM, women's wing of IKRAM, an Islamic revivalist group
(4) Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW), a secular multiracial regional organisation with headquarters based in Malaysia
(5) KRYSS Network, a secular multiracial group
(6) Dear Her, a secular multiracial youth-led group
(7) Malaysian Youth for Education Reform (MYER), a secular multiracial youth-led group

The study site was in the urban areas of the state of Selangor in Malaysia. The headquarters of the above-mentioned groups were in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor or in the surrounding urban areas in Selangor. Although some of these groups had grassroots branches in the other Malaysian states and in the semi-urban and rural areas of Malaysia, I chose to focus on women activists who lived and worked in Selangor because most of the prominent advocacy and activism activities occurs in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, and this contributes to the national discourse.

SIS, Helwa ABIM, and Wanita IKRAM were included in the study because these women's groups are well-known, mainstream, and long established in the Islamic activism circles in

[27] Based on the legal voting age of citizens in Malaysia, adult is defined in this study as 18 years old and above.

Malaysia. The women activists from these groups have been and continue to be involved in the public discourse on Islam, women's rights, and gender issues. The other four secular multiracial groups were included due to the snowball sampling method of participant recruitment, that is, an introduction to one group by an interlocuter led to introductions with interlocuters from the other groups. The introductions by the interlocuters in this manner indicated to me that even though the women were from different secular multiracial groups, they knew each other, which suggested that the secular activist circles in Malaysia may be close-knit. The four secular multiracial groups in this study were not necessarily representative of all the secular multiracial groups focused on women's rights and gender issues in Malaysia since there are numerous groups of this nature working on different causes related to women and gender. However, the interlocuters from the secular multiracial groups can be said to be representative of the younger demographic of Malay women activists who are involved in secular activist circles and living and working in the urban areas of Selangor in Malaysia. This is because the snowball sampling method of participant recruitment for the multiracial and secular groups resulted in interlocuters from the younger demographic of Malay women – ages between 20 and 30 years old. By contrast, the interlocuters from SIS, Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM were between 30 and 60 years old.

Sample Size

The study's sample size included five interlocuters each from SIS, Helwa ABIM, and Wanita IKRAM, and one interlocuter each from the four secular multiracial groups. The four secular multiracial groups were smaller in terms of membership compared to SIS, Helwa ABIM, and Wanita IKRAM. A total of 19 interlocuters constituted the study's sample size. The participant profile consisting of their age, group affiliation, educational background, and assigned pseudonym is listed in Appendix 1.

Method of Recruitment

The interlocuters were recruited for the study through the snowball sampling method. The snowball sampling method of recruitment process entailed identifying people who know other people who would make good interview interlocuters (Salmons 2004). This recruitment is suitable in reaching out to those who are typically difficult for a researcher to contact, such as the women activists in my study (Browne 2005). The websites for the Islamic revivalist groups and the other groups only lists the names and contact information of the leadership and not the

group members. So, I first established contact with the heads of SIS, Helwa ABIM, and Wanita IKRAM via email. I asked the heads of these three groups to forward my request for study participants and my contact information to the grassroots women activists. Those who were willing to participate in my study were able to contact me directly. This minimised the risk of the heads of the groups acting as a gatekeeper to determine who would participate in the study. It also ensured participant confidentiality because the potential interlocuters were able to communicate with me directly without any mediation or interference from the heads of the groups. I provided the potential participants who contacted me with more information on the study (see Appendices 3 and 4 for the informed consent form and the participant information sheet). Once an interlocuter confirmed her agreement to participate, I arranged the date and time for the interview via email. I also recruited additional interlocuters from the confirmed interlocuters. The confirmed interlocuters forwarded my contact information to other activists from different groups who were also interested in participating in my study. I managed to establish contact and recruit interlocuters from the four secular multiracial groups through this recruitment method.

There were several challenges in the recruitment of the interlocuters. Firstly, it took a much longer time to confirm the interview dates via email than I had anticipated because of delayed responses from the interlocuters. Some of the interlocuters kept changing the date of the interview, likely due to disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Malaysia. The pandemic was an unprecedented global context which made it even more challenging to recruit willing interlocuters. It was an overwhelming period for many people around the world including for Malaysians, who had to juggle anxiety about the virus spread, job responsibilities, and caregiving duties; some people also faced financial hardship due to pay cuts or job losses because of the sharp reduction in economic activities during the national lockdowns. I had to email some of the interlocuters several reminders before they would confirm the interview dates. On a few occasions, I had to seek out new willing interlocuters after failed attempts at confirming interview dates. It is possible that some of these initial contacts were dealing with pandemic-related stressors which took priority in their lives. Participant recruitment through email exchanges commenced in early August 2020 soon after I obtained the research ethical approval. It took me approximately nine months to complete the online interviews with the 19 interlocuters between 22 September 2020 and 1 July 2021.

Secondly, I had initially wanted to include the perspectives of women from Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity, ISMA) in this research. ISMA is a much smaller Islamic group compared to ABIM and IKRAM, but the group is well-known in Malaysia because of its often-controversial ultra-Malay Muslim nationalist views which are criticised by non-Malays as discriminatory. For example, an ISMA leader once accused Chinese Malaysians of being "trespassers" in Malaysia (Hamid and Razali 2016, p. 7). Key women leaders from Wanita ISMA (the women's wing), are also instrumental in organising and heading other groups such as the International Women's Alliance for Family and Quality Education (WAFIQ), which opposes gender equality and sex education initiatives in Malaysia. I reached out to my contact at Wanita ISMA, who I had previously established a relationship with when I worked as a researcher at a university in Singapore. She put me in contact with someone else in the group, who initially agreed to participate in the study but then stopped responding to my emails after some time. I tried identifying and reaching out to other Wanita ISMA members via their public social media accounts[28], but I failed in securing interviews through this method. Due to the difficulties in recruiting Wanita ISMA members, I had to drop the group from the study, which is a limitation to the research that I address later in this chapter.

4.2.2: Qualitative Interviewing

The research method I used to collect the individual-level data was semi-structured and in-depth qualitative interviews. This method of data collection is a means by which I sought to enter the worlds of the different Muslim women activists (Charmaz 2006). The primary objective of the in-depth qualitative interviews was to better understand the perspectives of the research participants as narrated to me in their own words and on their own terms (MacCracken 1998). The research method necessitated that I pose thoughtful questions to the participants, which would encourage them to describe and reflect on their experiences and perspectives "in ways that seldom occur in [their] everyday life" (Charmaz 2006, p. 24). The key goal in the qualitative interviewing process was for me to encourage the participants to share their personal perspectives that were shaped as a consequence of their own lived experiences of activism in Malaysia.

[28] It was difficult to identify public accounts that specified membership in Wanita ISMA; it is the same with the other Islamic revivalist women's groups, but I managed to get access with women from those groups through the snowball recruitment method.

I was also specifically interested in discerning whether the participants experienced changes in their own understandings of women's rights after they gained more knowledge of the positions of other women activists and/or interactions with women activists from different ideological groups. This meant I had to get the participants to be comfortable with me so that they could share their genuine reflections that went beyond the politically correct and/or public relations rhetoric of their respective groups' ideological positioning (Charmaz 2006). The groups' respective ideological positioning on various women's rights and gender issues often can be easily discerned from the online websites of the women's groups and the written materials such as advocacy positions and public statements that are disseminated on social media and news media platforms. However, written materials are not always reflective of nuanced changes in the ways of thinking of individuals within groups, which may in turn shape the actions or choices of the women activists through the informal routines of their activism and reform work (i.e., the forms of infra-political acts, thoughts, and gestures of women that occur discreetly and under the radar of the public eye that were discussed in Chapter Three).

The very nature of some questions posed to the participants to elicit such desired rich and reflective responses may be considered politically sensitive or unusual from the vantage points of the participants. Therefore, rather than adopt a structured interview format, I opted for a semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions on several topics that allowed me to tailor my questions based on the participant's receptivity and the narratives of experiences that emerged (Blee and Taylor 2002). Therefore, the semi-structured interview format provided me with a broad framework for the topics that I wished to discuss with the participants, and it also allowed me flexibility in the "the sequencing of questions, in their exact wording, and in the amount of time and attention given to different topics (Robson and McCarten 2016, p. 290).

4.2.3: Democratic Approach to Interviewing

Since I wished for the research participants to be forthcoming and candid with me during the interviews, I regarded them as my interlocuters who were co-engaged in a knowledge-producing practice with me rather than as subjects to be researched. By approaching the interlocuters as co-engaged in knowledge production with me, I recognised them as expert knowers, which is in line with the decolonial feminist standpoint discussed in Chapter Three. I conveyed and explained to the interlocuters my interview approach at the first point of contact

(via email) and again at the beginning of our conversations. The significance of regarding the participants as my interlocuters was that the interviews were designed and conducted in an interactive and conversational style. I also asked my interlocuters to articulate the bases of their perspectives on the various topics of issues discussed, and to reflect on the impact of their actions and choices on society and the public good. To elicit reflective responses from my interlocuters, I had to ask critical, and at times, take on contrarian positions on the topics. I took on critical and contrarian positions to push the interlocuters to provide more explanatory contextualisation to their perspectives and/or clarify their positions. However, at the same time, I did not wish to inadvertently create an antagonistic or confrontational dynamic during the conversation that would shut down an open and honest exchange with my interlocuters.

To this objective, I incorporated Curato's deliberative democratic principles for qualitative interviews to facilitate a more cooperative and democratic approach to interviewing in keeping with the recognition of the interlocuters as expert knowers. The deliberative democratic approach to qualitative interviewing departs from the "traditional" practice of interviews in which the researchers pose questions that the "respondents can answer using their own voice and direct the flow of the discussion by bringing up topics or issues they consider relevant" (Curato 2012, p. 572). In other words, in the traditional interviewing approach, the interviewer primarily gives time and space to the interlocuter(s) to share their perspectives in their own voices (Curato 2012). The key difference with the democratic approach to interviewing is to also encourage an exchange where the researcher and the interlocuter can "critically interrogate each other's views, weigh their preferences, and contribute to generating shared understanding" (Curato 2012, p. 581). Therefore, this form of critical exchange fosters the "deliberative democratic" element of the interviews, which is in keeping with the decolonial feminist standpoint view that the interlocuters are expert knowers who can be pushed to provide more explanatory contextualisation to their perspectives and/or reflect and clarify their positions.

The three principles based on Curato's deliberative democratic approach to qualitative interviews that I incorporated in my interviewing protocol were: (1) inclusion; (2) transparency in knowledge production; and (3) public spiritedness (2012). The principle of inclusion entailed that I develop an inclusive communication practice that allowed me and my interlocuter(s) to engage with each other as equal peers in a social interaction. I communicated to my interlocuters that my objective was to understand their perspectives through a conversation that

would require me to pose critical questions at times. I emphasised to them that I wanted to engage in a conversation rather than engage in a question-and-answer session. To frame my questions only in a caring and empathetic fashion would have limited our exchange to a predominantly one-way question-and-answer interaction where the interlocuter limits her sharing to the question(s) I posed. Therefore, I did not limit my interviewing style to that of a caring and empathetic questioner. Instead, the principle of inclusion necessitated that I also conveyed respect to my interlocuter(s) as my equal by engaging critically with their justifications of the perspectives they shared with me. This manner of including the interlocuters in an interactive conversation during the interviews was beneficial because it gave "voice to respondents [i.e., the interlocuters] by asking them to characterize their positions in relation to the researcher's critique and vice versa" (Curato 2012, p. 578).

The second principle of transparency in knowledge production entailed disclosing my research objectives, my own opinions, and the contrarian positions of other interlocuters, during the conversation with an interlocuter. This was beneficial because such disclosures during a conversation made more transparent the power in the relationship between me as a researcher and the interlocuter(s). As the researcher, I hold the power not only to set the research agenda but to also interpret the perspectives of the interlocuters based on my own perspectives, opinions, and biases. Therefore, practicing transparency with the interlocuters was a way for me to express my own positionality and thoughts about my research objectives during the interview process itself (I elaborate on researcher positionality in the following section). By being transparent, I gave my interlocuters the opportunity to "challenge, interrogate, or support" the contrarian positions and even my research objectives (Curato 2012, p. 579). By practicing transparency through the sharing of information and perspectives, I facilitated an open, honest, and engaging two-way interactive conversation that was geared toward a knowledge production process that actively involved the interlocuters.

The third principle of public spiritedness entailed me posing questions to the interlocuters to get them to reflect on the possible impact of their perspectives or preferences on society and the public good (Curato 2012). So rather than aiming to only elicit responses from the interlocuters based on their self-interested vantage points and/or ideological leanings, I also posed the kinds of questions that allowed the interlocuters to consider the wider ramifications of their respective positions on polarisation in Malaysia. This form of questioning was a way to shift the focus from the collecting of narratives to the uncovering of implicit assumptions or

biases of the interlocuter (Curato 2012). By making the possible assumptions or biases of the interlocuter explicit through a critical line of questioning, I gave my interlocuter an opportunity to reflect and respond to the issues being discussed. I often left this line of questioning toward the latter part of the conversation. I introduced critical questions in our conversation only after I believed that I had already established a good rapport with the interlocuter. This helped to prevent the breakdown of communication between us.

In summary, the deliberative democratic approach to qualitative interviewing enabled me to pose sensitive yet probing and critical follow-up questions in a respectful and tactful manner. This style of interviewing elicited the desired meaningful, rich, and illuminating responses from my interlocuters. Furthermore, the interlocuter(s) also posed challenging questions to me or provided elaboration on why they rejected a particular position, which facilitated the desired interactive conversation between us.

4.2.4: COVID-19 Pandemic and Online Interviews

The interviews were originally planned to be conducted face-to-face at the study site in Selangor, Malaysia. However, the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the ensuing national lockdowns and cross-border travel restrictions in Malaysia and in Singapore where I was living during the research disrupted these plans. At the height of the pandemic, non-essential gatherings were prohibited, and later discouraged. It was impossible to conduct face-to-face interviews during this period, even after travel restrictions lifted, because close contact may have been risky or made my interlocuters feel uncomfortable. As a result, the interviews with the interlocuters were conducted over a secured online video-conferencing platform called Zoom. The shift to increased reliance on online communications during the pandemic was a global experience, which in a way accelerated ongoing societal trends in Internet adoption for social interactions, work collaboration, and research (Salmons 2014). There are advantages and challenges to online interviewing, which I discuss below.

Advantages of Online Interviews

The pivot to online video-conferencing interviews was unexpected, but it came with some unique advantages. Several qualitative research studies indicated that both researchers and

participants found the convenience of online interviews beneficial. It saved on travel time and cost for both the researchers and the participants, and the online video functionality aided in rapport building (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). The participants could also connect with the researchers from their home environment, which made them feel more relaxed to share freely (Oliffe et al 2021). In fact, one study found that similar forms of rich data were obtained through online interviewing as thorough face-to-face interviewing (Jenner and Myers 2019).

I highlight the following advantages of online interviewing based on my experience and the comments from my interlocuters:

Flexibility, Convenience and Comfort of Home: My interlocuters expressed to me that they found the online connection more convenient than it would have been face-to-face because it saved on travel time. Time was a major factor for the interlocuters because of the gendered effect of pandemic related challenges where women bore the brunt of caregiving duties while working from home (see McLaren et al 2020). The majority of the interlocuters conducted the online interviews from their homes because they had already pivoted to working from home due to physical distancing requirements in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of my interlocuters who were working mothers said they were juggling multiple responsibilities such as managing tasks related to their day jobs, attending to activism work, and taking care of their young children at home. As such, they expressed an appreciation for the flexibility, convenience, and comfort of connecting online from their own homes.

Accessible and User-Friendly: The Zoom platform was also easily accessible and user friendly for the interlocuters. By the time the interviewing for this study commenced in September 2020, my interlocuters were already accustomed to using the Zoom platform for their own work. While not everyone had an institutional paid Zoom account, the Zoom platform for one-to-one online meetings during 2020 and 2021 were free and there were no restrictions in the meeting duration (Zoom later restricted the meeting duration to 45 minutes in the free version in 2022 after my interviews were completed). Therefore, all my interlocuters had their own Zoom accounts at the time of the interviews and they found the Zoom platform easily accessible.

Video Function Facilitated Rapport Building: The video-conferencing function of the Zoom platform also facilitated rapport building. 18 of the interlocuters opted to use the video feature,

which indicated that they were at ease with the video functionality (only one interlocuter declined to show herself on video because she did not wish to have her video image recorded which highlighted the privacy concerns of online interviewing that I later discuss in section 5.3). Maintaining eye contact and communication through facial and non-verbal expressions (e.g., smiles, laughter, nodding head in agreement) were generally easy to convey and comprehend during the conversation. One participant mentioned to me that it felt to her like she was having me in her living room for a chat – albeit she could not offer me the tea and refreshments that she would have, if I had physically been there with her.

Informal Interactions: The online video-conferencing interviews had an unexpected effect of fostering informal interactions between myself and my interlocuters who were connecting from their home environments. The interlocuters had the freedom of movement within their homes during the interviews, which allowed me glimpses into their homes, family members, and their lives. For example, at times, there were interruptions to our conversation when a young child walked into the video frame and then interacted with the interlocuter. One interlocuter fed her child some food while continuing to speak to me. This glimpse into the personal lives of the interlocuters also occurred at times when the spouse of an interlocuter appeared in the video frame. Sometimes, these informal interactions in the interlocuter's home environment, which I witnessed, became personalised and concrete examples that the interlocuters referenced later when we spoke on topics of women's rights, family, gender equality and gender complementarity. As such, the interviews of those who were connecting online from their home environments had the effect of blurring the distinction between the private self (home) and the public self (activist). This effect contributed to the informal (and intimate) nature of the online interviews between me and the interlocuters.

Willingness to Spend More Time: The interlocuters were informed at the initial point of contact via email that the estimated duration of the online interviews would be between 1 and 1.5 hours. However, I found that many of the interlocuters were willing to spend more time with me. Notably, I noticed a distinction between the few interlocuters who connected online from their offices and the majority of the interlocuters who connected online from their homes. Those connecting from the offices tended to be more mindful of the time they spent in conversation with me. This meant that the interviews with interlocuters connecting from their offices seldom went beyond 1.5 hours. Conversely, those who connected from their homes tended to spend more time in conversation with me – a few of such online interviews ranged

between 2.5 and 3 hours in duration. I noticed that the more time we spent together in conversation, the interlocuter(s) became more reflective on some of the more sensitive topics such as teenage pregnancies and gay Muslims. It was possible, as other researchers have also suggested, that the home environments "aided the flow, candour and ultimately the richness of what was said and shared by participants" (Oliffe et al 2021, p. 6). Even though some of these interviews extended well beyond the estimated duration of 1.5 hours, some of the interlocuters expressed a sense of satisfaction in having had the opportunity to communicate their thoughts, and they also thanked me for listening and engaging with them.

Disadvantages of Online Interviews

The primary disadvantages of online video-conferencing interviews were related to issues of establishing trust, connectivity, and an inability for me to anticipate where my interlocuters would be connecting from.

Trust: Online interviewers require more "people skills" than face-to-face interviewers since trust between the researcher and interlocuters must be established from the outset at the initial contact to the recruitment process and to the preparation steps for the actual interview (Salmons 2014, p. 224). Establishing trust through online communications can be challenging because the interlocuter can choose to disengage abruptly without prior notice such as not replying to emails or disconnecting from the online platform during the interview, which the researcher cannot control (Salmons 2014). Despite my attempts at establishing trust with the women from Wanita ISMA, such as using the Malay language in my emails and referencing my relationship with my contact within the group, the women from Wanita ISMA chose to stop replying to my emails. So, I was forced to exclude the group from my study. Furthermore, the initial contact with the interlocuters were via email, which meant that trust had to be established solely through written words where the human touch such as voice and imagery was absent. Some of the interlocuters took several emails exchanges to be comfortable enough to proceed. In one case, a young university student from a secular group agreed to participate, but then she pulled out later saying that her parents thought it might affect her career in the future. She declined to participate even after being informed that her identity would be kept confidential. One method I used to establish trust was to send them links to my research profile and copies of scholarly work and commentaries I had written on Malaysia. I believed that this was helpful in establishing my credibility as a researcher with good intentions. Some of my commentaries

had been translated and published in Malay language newspapers. I specifically sent copies of the commentaries written in Malay because I thought it might help make me more trustworthy and relatable to the women. The subject of my written work on Malaysia was also likely of interest to them. Some of them asked questions related to the work I had sent them during the interviews, which indicated to me that they had read them.

Connectivity: Although the Zoom platform was easily accessible and user friendly, there were occasional issues with Internet connectivity. For example, when there was heavy rain in the interlocuter's location or my location, the Internet connection signal became weak, which caused disconnections from the Zoom platform. The connectivity issues interrupted the flow of the conversation. Even though we may have been deeply engaged in a conversation prior to the connectivity issue, such sudden disconnections reminded us that our connection to each other was in fact tenuous and dependent on a virtual Internet connection. Time and effort were inevitably lost in the attempt to reconnect via the Zoom platform and then to pick up the conversation prior to the disruption. On these occasions when there were sudden connectivity-related disruptions, I found it helpful to send a text message or an email to reassure the interlocuter that we would reconnect and resume. In this way, we could maintain a level of continuity in the communication through text-based mediums, which helped to minimise the jarring effect of the sudden loss of the video and audio connections.

Virtual Location: As Oliffe et al highlighted, one other drawback of online interviews is that the researcher has no control over the location of the interview (Oliffe et al 2021). This was true in my experience. I could not anticipate if the interlocuter(s) would connect online from their offices or their homes. As the previous section noted, I discerned that there was a difference in an interlocuter's willingness to spend more time in conversation depending on whether they connected online from their office or home. The interlocuters' interactions with family members during the interviews in their home environment extended the overall time we spent together during the interviews. Some of the richer discussions were with interlocuters connecting from their homes and these often ranged between 2.5 to 3 hours. Since there was no way for me to determine where the interlocuter would connect from prior to the interview, I found it helpful to set aside more time for each interview in my schedule. In other words, I chose to block a minimum of 3.5 hours for each interview in my schedule, even though sometimes the interview durations with some interlocuters were shorter.

4.3: Ethical Considerations in Research

My submissions for ethical approval to the Universiti Sains Malaysia (University of Science Malaysia) and the University of Liverpool for conducting online video-conferencing interviews with my interlocuters based in Malaysia were approved on 29 July 2020. The ethical approval process was useful in thinking about the ethical considerations for the research, which I detail in this section. These ethical considerations were guided by the key principles in the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach developed in Chapter Three.

4.3.1: Positionality and Active Reflexivity

The decolonial feminist standpoint research approach that I developed in Chapter Three emphasises the principle of recognising and accounting for the social situatedness of both knowledge production and scholarly critique. This principle is related to positionality wherein one's social location, access to resources, and personal experiences influence one's perceptions and understandings. In the context of research, the researcher is in a position of power in relation to the interlocuters because the researcher sets the research agenda and objectives and interprets the data. Yet the researcher may have her own personal biases and ideological assumptions that may affect the research process and the conclusions drawn. Positionality encompasses the different social aspects that shapes one's identity (for e.g., gender, race, religion, class, nationality, education), one's personal experiences, ideologies, and motivations in relation to understanding the social and political contexts in the research study (Berger 2015). Furthermore, the various aspects that contribute to positionality are not static, but intersectional and context dependent (Soedirgo and Glas 2020). Therefore, there is not one single positionality but rather several positionalities to account for. The researcher then must develop an awareness of her positionalities because they shape how she views and understands the world in relation to the research conducted. The researcher should also develop a strategy to mitigate potential harms on the interlocuters while being cognisant that the interlocuters also have their own positionalities. In-depth interviewing on sensitive, traumatic, controversial, or difficult to talk about topics may cause emotional harms to the interlocuter, and limitations to ensuring the anonymity of the interlocuters may make it possible for others to infer who they are (Osborne and Grant-Smith 2021).

Developing awareness and strategies to mitigate these potential harms on interlocuters as well as the production of biased research is necessary because researcher positionality is embedded with power and privilege in four ways: (1) the power differential between the researcher and the researched stems from their different identities, social locations, and access to resources (2) by leading the research process, the researcher can produce unequal exchanges with the interlocuters which is potentially exploitative (3) the researcher interprets and represents the collected data from the interlocuters (4) the researcher's publications of the research work contributes to the construction and reification of what constitutes as valid knowledge (Wolf 2006; Muhammed et al 2015). As such, the onus is on the researcher to identify and interrogate her positionality to manage the power and privilege that may be embedded in her identity and worldviews as an essential part of conducting ethical research (Parson 2019).

The decolonial feminist standpoint research approach, which centres multiple women's perspectives and recognises the multiplicity of valid knowledges, seeks to collect, and evaluate the Malay women activists' perspectives, choices, and actions through a critical decolonial feminist standpoint lens. The tensions between feminist theory and the study of Malay women that I identified in Chapter Three necessitate that I adopt a continual practice of reflexive self-evaluation to unlearn precepts of coloniality that may otherwise obscure my ability to recognise valid and plural knowledges and worldviews. Reflexivity – defined as recognising and responding to positionality (Soedirgo and Glas 2020) – helps to highlight the power differentials between the researcher and the interlocuters and to manage them. Soedirgo and Glas' active reflexivity method that I adopted involves the researcher practicing three ongoing interrogations throughout the research process and the data analysis: (1) reflect on one's own positionality (2) reflect on how the interlocuters are likely to perceive the researcher's positionality within the research context (3) re-examine the assumptions made during the first two interrogations as the research progresses (2020).

Active Reflexivity in Practice

I incorporated active reflexivity in my research methods by documenting my reflections on positionality prior to the interviews, then revisiting and reassessing my reflections as the interviews progressed. I did so with the understanding that my initial reflections were likely to be incomplete, but the reflections were an essential and iterative process that enhanced my

learning as the research interviews progressed. I continued with the reflective practice during the data analysis process as well. The following sub-section summarises my reflections.

My Positionalities: I identify myself as a Southeast Asian Muslim woman of ethnic Indian ancestry, who is bilingual in the English and Malay languages. While I am a third-generation Singaporean, I consider myself a cultural "insider" to Malaysia. I share key demographic characteristics with my interlocuters – same gender, religion, and culture, which I believed would allow me to conduct the interviews as an "insider" (Kirpitchenko and Voloder 2014). Furthermore, the citizens of Singapore and Malaysia are intimately connected by an intertwined history where the two land territories were in fact viewed by their inhabitants as one geo-body (i.e., a space that went beyond state borders) prior to and during British colonialism until Singapore's separation in 1965 (Aljunied 2019). Historically, cross-migrations prior to 1965 between the two land territories meant that many families today still have relatives with different citizenships living across the border from each other. This is the case with my own family, with distant relatives in my extended family who are Malaysian citizens. Therefore, I see Singaporeans and Malaysians as essentially one people connected by a shared history and culture but politically separated by the 1960s ethnic politics of the two postcolonial ruling governments, the 1965 ouster of Singapore from Malaysia, and the subsequent political trajectories of both countries. In addition, I had worked as a researcher in academia for over 6 years prior to my PhD studies and acquired extensive knowledge of Malaysian history, society, and contemporary domestic politics. Therefore, I believed that my familiarisation with Malaysian culture, history and politics would position me as an "insider" and help me conduct the interviews with the appropriate cultural sensitivity that will increase the comfortability of my interlocuters during the interview.

However, I was also aware of some possible differences between the interlocuters and myself that could position me as an "outsider". Compared to some of my interlocuters, I have had experiences that may have likely shaped my worldviews in different ways. My young adult formative years (from 18 years old onwards) were spent in the United States where I attained my tertiary education and earned three degrees. Because of my formal education in the West, I am more familiar (and comfortable) with Western theory and reasoning than I am with Islamic Studies, Indigenous theories, and Islamic reasoning (*usul-al fiqh*). Although I made efforts later in my life, both in my capacity as a researcher and as a practicing Muslim, to educate myself on theories from Southeast Asian thinkers and Islamic reasoning, it is possible that my opinions

and perspectives that were shaped during my young adult formative years are in fact more influenced by "Western" intellectual culture than I would like to acknowledge. Furthermore, although I am bilingual in English and Malay, I am more comfortable communicating in English because I learned Malay formally in school as a second language and it is not my native language. On the other hand, my interlocuters would likely consider Malay their native language and some may be more comfortable communicating in Malay than in English.

Another concern I had was whether I would possibly experience some of the feminists' uneasiness with religious Muslim women that I had identified and critiqued in Chapter Three when I am interacting with the Islamic women activists; for example, I may have my biases against the idea of traditional gender roles. To avoid this, I must critically examine my own thoughts and reactions to responses from my interlocuters – particularly those from the Islamic revivalist groups who profess to rely on Islamic reasoning. Therefore, I endeavoured to take time to listen carefully to my interlocuters and to ask respectful yet critical questions through the deliberative democratic approach of interviewing. In this way, I aimed to better understand their perspectives, and not reproduce unequal power relations and reinforce coloniality unconsciously through my positionality. By being aware of my positionality, examining my assumptions, and assessing my reactions, I would be better able to engage with religious Muslim women on equal terms in line with decolonial feminist standpoint research praxis.

Interlocuters' Perceptions of My Positionality: Although I considered myself an "insider" because of the shared characteristics of gender, religion, and culture, I was aware that the interlocuters could perceive me differently because of my physical characteristics, my nationality, and my researcher status. Firstly, all my interlocuters are Malays while I am an Indian. Given that race is a salient category in Malaysia due to ethnic politics, would my skin colour mark me as an Indian and hence an "outsider"? Some of the interlocuters may not be as candid with the more sensitive questions about Malaysian politics as I would like them to be because of my race. For example, would they be comfortable to express their genuine thoughts about Malay special privileges as a birth-right to an Indian when Indian Malaysians are excluded from such special privileges in Malaysia? Secondly, overt religious observations, such as Muslim women wearing the *tudung* (Malay word for headscarf), are also salient in Malaysia due to Islamic revivalist movement since the 1970s. It is likely that my interlocuters from the Islamic revivalist groups would wear the *tudung* during the interviews. However, I do not wear the *tudung* even though I identify as a practicing Muslim woman. Would my

interlocuters from the Islamic groups label me as "secular-leaning" because I choose not to wear the *tudung*? Would it be harder for me to build rapport with them then? Correspondingly, would I be able to build rapport more easily with my interlocuters from the Islamic feminist and secular-oriented groups? How would this affect the quality of my data collection and analysis? Thirdly, my nationality and my researcher status in a UK university may contribute to my interlocuters' perception that I am an "outsider". This may limit our interaction to the superficial where the interlocuters offer only politically correct responses and/or public relations rhetoric of their respective groups' ideological positioning because they are motivated to enlighten or educate the "outsider" about their country and their group. Therefore, in this context, the interlocuters' perception of me as an "outsider" would be limiting to my objective of drawing out and understanding their genuine reflections. Given this, I endeavoured to build rapport with my interlocuters by creating opportunities during the interviews where I shared some personal information about myself and my knowledge about Malaysia that implicitly emphasised our shared characteristics.

The above-mentioned reflections in the first two reflexivity stages helped me to formulate the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 2). I included an introductory stage in the interview guide where I posed questions that allowed my interlocuter to speak about themselves and their lives, and their personal motivations for their advocacy and reform work. This introductory stage of the interview was also a good opportunity for me to share background information about myself and my motivations for the research. Overall, the questions were meant to be a general guide for the topics I wanted to cover in the interviews – namely the women's perspectives and experiences on (1) Malaysian politics and society (2) activism on women's rights and gender issues (3) women activists from other groups. While I did not follow the order of questions as listed in the interview guide, I managed to cover these topics during the interview. My reflections on positionality allowed me to be more comfortable in sharing my background and thoughts with the interlocuters.

Re-examination of My Assumptions: As the interviews progressed, I found that the majority of my interlocuters wore the *tudung* – as predicted all the women from the two Islamic revivalist groups wore the *tudung*, and most of the women from SIS and the secular multi-racial groups did not. In addition to *tudung* as an overt display of religious observance, religion rather than race was a more salient aspect of their identities that my interlocuters referenced in the interviews. Most of my interlocuters assumed that I was a fellow Muslim, probably based

on my obviously Muslim sounding last name. Still, some of the interlocuters checked to see if I understood the various Islamic terms and the rationale behind certain Islamic dictates. A few of them even asked me whether I was Malay since I could speak Malay. Therefore, to build rapport with them during the initial stages of the interviews, I was forthcoming with my own Muslim background by communicating my awareness of the Islamic terms and content of the religion. The fact that I could also speak and understand the Malay and Arabic terms used by the interlocuters during the interviews also helped with rapport-building. The Malay colloquial expression "masuk Melayu" (to become Malay) is intimately connected to the Malay community being the dominant Muslim ethnic group in Malaysia (and in Singapore); as such, the assimilative function of Islam in Malaysia meant that non-Malays who were Muslims became accepted members of the Malay-Muslim community (Siddique 1981). Therefore, my initial concern about my Indian race or nationality being a limiting factor to an open and honest conversation was sufficiently managed because I was parsed by my interlocuters as an "insider" based on our shared religion, Southeast Asian cultural identity, and female sex. I discerned I was parsed as an "insider" on topics about religion through certain phrases said by the interlocuters such as "you would know what I mean" when discussing sensitive issues on child marriage, sex education, and female circumcision in Islam.

Instead, I discerned that I was parsed as an "outsider" because of my researcher identity especially on the questions about politics. For example, one interlocuter was initially hesitant to elaborate her thoughts on corruption in Malaysian politics over fears of what I would do with her perspectives. She kept responding with "no comment" to several questions. In this instance, I had to make an extra effort to be transparent about my motivations for the research (and reiterate the objectives including confidentiality of her name) during the interview to minimise any potentiality for the interlocuters to see me as biased during my more critical line of questioning during the interviews. The transparency was also necessary because some interlocuters asked me whether their views were "correct" when we discussed their understandings on the meanings to terms such as "liberal" and "conservative". In these moments, I discerned that they saw me a researcher who held authoritative knowledge. What I wanted though was to hear their own understandings. So, I would reiterate to them that there were no right or wrong responses because I was motivated to understand their own perspectives and their rationale for those perspectives. In the end, I was most likely perceived by my interlocuters as both an "insider" and an "outsider" – I could sufficiently gain their trust because of the commonalities in our identities as Southeast Asian Muslim females, but I was also

sufficiently distant from their circles so they could be free to be honest on sensitive topics.

4.3.2: Informed Consent

Ensuring transparency with the interlocuters was an important ethical consideration for the research. As previously discussed, the benefit of transparency was that it facilitated an open, honest, and engaging two-way interactive conversation geared toward a knowledge production process that actively involved the interlocuters. Transparency through obtaining their informed consent was incorporated in the initial stages of contact with the interlocuters. After the interlocuters expressed an interest to participate in the study and with their permission, I emailed them the study information sheet and consent form for their review (see Appendix 3 and 4). The information sheet contained a brief overview of the intentions of the study and an overview of the expectations of participation. I encouraged the potential interlocuter(s) to ask questions and seek clarifications on the study. Once the potential interlocuter(s) was agreeable to participate, I asked them to email me an electronically signed consent form. Once I was in receipt of the signed consent form, I arranged for the online interview.

Some of the interlocuters asked for a list of questions that I would ask prior to our meeting. I emailed them a pared down version of the semi-structured interview guide to those who asked. However, I also stressed that while the topics covered would be as stated in the list of questions, the questions asked would not be limited to the guide nor posed in the exact order or phrased in same way. Even though, I had received the signed informed consent from the interlocuters prior to the interviews, I also sought verbal consent at the start of the online interviews. I asked the interlocuters to confirm that they had read and understood the information sheet. I also gave them opportunities to ask me questions prior to the interview.

4.3.3: Sensitive Research

The overall potential of vulnerability or risk to the interlocuters was minimal for my research study. However, there was a small possibility that some of my interlocuters would experience stress or upset feelings upon reflecting on their personal experiences on activism in Malaysia, particularly since the topics covered polarisation due to Malaysian politics and the impact on women's rights and gender issues. To minimise such possibilities, I ensured that the

interlocuters were fully informed about the nature of interview questions that could be asked prior to the interview. I sent them the information sheet on the study and answered questions they posed to me via email exchanges.

Nevertheless, there was still a concern that some of the interlocuters could experience some stress or upset feelings during the interview. As such, I ensured that the interlocuters were aware that they were able to withdraw or pause the interview at any stage. At the beginning of our online interview, I verbally reiterated some of the pertinent points in the informed consent form that the interlocuters had already signed earlier. First, the study was geared toward understanding their own perspectives and lived experiences of activism. As such, there was a slight possibility that some of the interview questions could result in personal reflections that could be upsetting. Second, I informed the interlocuters that as a PhD student researcher, I was not able to offer any form of mental health or welfare advice as I had no professional expertise in these areas. Third, I also informed the interlocuters that they may choose to pause the interview, skip answering some questions, or withdraw their participation at any stage of the interview. I was mindful to observe for any discomfort with my line of questioning and I was ready to pause the interview if needed. In the end, none of my interlocuters experienced or expressed any discomfort. In the rare instances when the interlocuters told me narratives that they said explicitly were "off-the-record", I respected their wishes, and those specific accounts were not included in the data analysis.

4.3.4: Confidentiality

There was a small possibility that the interlocuters could be placed at risk when their thoughts on Islam, women's rights, and gender issues – topics that are often implicated in polarising politics in Malaysia – were shared with me. To ensure that the interlocuters were protected, I ensured strict participant confidentiality by anonymising the interlocuters' names in the research data so that they cannot be identified (see Appendix 1 for the pseudonyms randomly assigned to the interlocuters). Nevertheless, there will always be some limitations to the guarantee of anonymity (Salmons 2014). I chose to name the women's groups because the study was focused on understanding the possibilities for intersections between these ideologically different groups that are known to contribute to the national discourse on Islam and women's rights. However, some of the women's groups are relatively small in membership

which could make identification of the interlocuters easier, even when their names are anonymised. I had to take more care in limiting the inclusion of descriptive information about the interlocuters that could make them identifiable. However, even with the added efforts at anonymising the names, there is still always the small possibility that there are members in the groups who I have not interviewed but whose real names match the pseudonyms.[29]

With consent from the interlocuters, the online interviews were recorded and saved as video and audio files on the Zoom cloud platform as a default setting. After each interview, the files from the Zoom cloud platform were transferred onto a password protected laptop that was used for my research purposes. The files stored on the Zoom cloud platform were deleted after being transferred onto my password protected laptop. This was done immediately after each interview was completed. No-one, apart from myself, had access to the files. However, online privacy concerns, especially about the misuse of video and images, are prevalent given the ubiquity of Internet use today (Salmons 2014). One interlocuter declined to be appear on video presumably because of such concerns. I chose to delete the video files and used only the audio files to transcribe the interviews.

4.4: Data Analysis

4.4.1: Transcription of Interviews

The Zoom service provided an artificial intelligence (AI) generated transcription of the interviews when the interviews were saved onto the Zoom cloud platform. However, the AI transcript could not capture the Malay and Arabic language words from the interviews. Although most of the interviews were conducted in English, there were numerous occasions when Malay was used, and Arabic terms referenced in the discussion. Whenever there was the introduction of non-English words in the conversation though, the AI generated transcription for the subsequent English words was not accurate. Therefore, I had to listen to each interview and manually edit the transcript. So, even though there were AI generated transcripts to work with, the errors made the editing process time-consuming. The benefit of having to do the manual transcription though was that the process made me become more familiar with the data,

[29] The only other way around this issue is to assign numbers or code letters to the women, but that might have an unintended effect of rendering the women's perspectives too impersonal and not relatable as individuals.

even before I began formally coding. This familiarisation with the data is an important first step in the coding process (Braun and Clarke 2006).

4.4.2: Critical Thematic Analysis

Critical thematic analysis (CTA) was used as a methodological tool to code and interpret the qualitative interview data. The main element with CTA is the emphasis on critical perspectives that are "folded into the thematic analysis" (Lawless and Chen 2019, p. 93). CTA is different from the popular mode of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis is often used by qualitative researchers in the social sciences because of its flexibility in application to data (2006). As Braun and Clarke argued, their mode of thematic analysis "is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and therefore it can be used within different theoretical frameworks" (2006). However, Lawless and Chen argue that CTA would be more useful when it came to analysing "qualitative research interviews and everyday discourses from critical standpoints" (2019, p. 93). The critical perspectives or standpoints that Lawless and Chen refers to are the ones where power is recognised and analysed. As such, CTA is more congruent with the objectives of my research, which uses the decolonial feminist standpoint as an analytical lens to examine the interrelationships between public discourse, women activists' perspectives, women activists' practices, power relations and the groups' ideologies. While I relied on CTA in coding my interview data, I also incorporated two elements from Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis as my preliminary coding steps: (1) familiarisation with the data (2) generate initial codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). These preliminary coding steps were then followed by Lawless and Chen's two-step CTA coding and analysis process, which are detailed in the next section.

Coding Process and Analysis

First, I undertook Braun and Clarke's familiarisation with the data step during the manual transcription process where I listened to the audio recording of the interviews (2006). In this stage, I underlined important or interesting texts in the interview transcript as I transcribed the audio recordings. I also highlighted in the transcript the tone and the non-verbal expressions of the interlocuter – for example, laughter, annoyance, anger, exclamations, and tonal emphasis of the words used.

The second step was to read the transcripts and generate initial codes. The initial codes were descriptive labels of what I deemed were the important and/or interesting sections of the interviews. I highlighted the relevant section in a coloured font with the label as a header of the section. As this coding step was done through line-by-line reading of the transcripts, the initial codes generated were numerous. Some examples of initial codes included: politicians using religion to survive in the political sphere; challenging norms on female circumcision; educated women internalising patriarchal beliefs. The initial labels were useful because it enabled me to focus on the relevant sections more quickly during the CTA coding process and analysis. I avoided wasting time in re-reading the irrelevant parts of the interviews.

Third, I implemented Lawless and Chen's two-step coding process for CTA. The first step for CTA entailed open coding of the labelled sections of the transcripts, with special attention paid to the elements of repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness (Lawless and Chen 2019). Repetition is when specific words and/or phrases are repeated by the different interlocuters; recurrence is when meanings are being repeated by the interlocuters but not necessarily using the same words and/or phrases; and forcefulness is the importance interlocuters assign to their words through their tone, volume, and inflection (Lawless and Chen 2019). The objective of the open coding with the focus on repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness was to centre the "understanding, privileging, and honoring [of] what our participants were actually saying and revealing to us about their social worlds and how these phenomenological experiences were similar across respondents" (Lawless and Chen 2019, p. 98). The overarching questions guiding this coding step was: what was being repeated, recurrent, and forceful in the interview data? (Lawless and Chen 2019). In this manner, the open coding step was geared toward uncovering the emerging themes from the vantage points of the women. This step was useful in locating the themes and intersections between the women which are detailed in Chapters Seven and Eight. For example, the women from the different groups related similar experiences and struggles about sexist discrimination and male opposition to women's leadership, which I categorised under the theme of sexist oppression.

The next step for the CTA was closed coding and analysis. I re-read the transcripts with an eye toward considering the interrelationships between public discourse, women's perspectives, women's social practices, power relations in the Malaysian context and the groups' ideologies. The overarching question guiding the closed coding and analysis step was: what ideologies, positions of power, or status hierarchies are recurring, repeated, and forceful in the interview

data? (Lawless and Chen 2019). This process also entailed reflecting on what was not being said by the interlocuters or missing in the interview data, and why this may have been the case.

4.5: Limitations to Research

One limitation to this research is that it is based on the perspectives and experiences of women from the urban areas of Malaysia, primarily those living and working in the city centre areas in Selangor. Therefore, although the Islamic revivalist groups (Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM) have women's grassroots branches in other Malaysian states and in the semi-urban and rural areas of Malaysia, the research cannot be generalised to account for the experiences of Islamic women activists in other parts of Malaysia. The Islamic women activists outside of Selangor do not have opportunities for interaction with SIS and the secular multiracial groups because these latter groups only have offices in Selangor, which means the engagements between the different ideological women' groups thus far occur only in Selangor. Furthermore, the movements between social worlds that will be addressed in Chapter Seven were a consequence of women's personal experiences in dealing with diversity and navigating complex situations during their advocacy work. It is unclear whether the Islamic women activists in other parts of Malaysia would be exposed to or have to deal with the same kinds of complex situations in the way that those living in urban areas do. Nevertheless, the research insights in this thesis are significant because it focuses on the women activists who function as elite actors contributing to the national discourse on Islam and women. Perspectives from elite actors are important because they are central in framing public contention on hot-button issues (Hunter and Wolfe 2006).

Another limitation is the absence of perspectives from the women in Wanita ISMA due to difficulties in establishing trust via email recruitment. Even though ISMA is a much smaller Islamic group compared to ABIM and IKRAM, the group is well-known in Malaysia because of its often-controversial ultra-Malay Muslim nationalist views. Key women leaders from Wanita ISMA are also instrumental in organising the opposition to gender equality and sex education initiatives in Malaysia, which contributes to polarising culture wars over Islam, women, and gender issues. Nevertheless, the absence of perspectives from Wanita ISMA does not alter the significance of this research's novel findings on intersections in understandings between the different ideological women's groups. In expanding this research for a published

monograph in the future, more effort would be made to recruit Wanita ISMA interlocuters. Now that cross-border travel restrictions have been lifted, it may be easier to develop trust through face-to-face interactions for the recruitment of interlocuters from Wanita ISMA.

4.6: Conclusion

The pivot to online interviewing at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made the recruitment process via email more difficult because of long delays in the interlocuters' responses. I was forced to drop Wanita ISMA from my study because contacts within that groups stopped replying to emails. Nevertheless, although online interviewing came with challenges of establishing trust, connectivity issues and unpredictability in terms of time allocated for the interviews, there were overall more advantages than disadvantages. The online interviews offered my interlocuters (several of whom were working mothers) flexibility and convenience because they could connect from their homes at time when there were numerous disruptions to normal living due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who connected from their homes spent more time with me during the interviews, which resulted in informal and intimate interactions between us that facilitated rapport building. The rapport enabled me to pose sensitive yet probing and critical follow-up questions to my interlocuters in a respectful and tactful manner. The online interviews elicited the meaningful, rich, and illuminating responses from my interlocuters that I wanted. Before discussing the empirical findings from the interviews, the next chapter explains the wider political context in Malaysia that shapes and constrains the women activists' actions and choices. The chapter explains the politically motivated construction of the 'liberal' Muslim Other category as a divisive sectarianising tool, which feeds into present-day culture wars and tend to promote distrust between the ideologically different Malay women's groups.

Chapter Five

Ethnic Politics and the 'Liberal' Muslim Other in Malaysia

…there is a symbiotic relationship between social pressure from below – demands for greater inclusion, rights, recognition, and representation – and the refusal by the state from above to share or relinquish power. This produces a crisis of legitimacy that ruling elites must carefully manage to retain power. The result of this political dynamic is sectarianization (Hashemi and Postel 2017, p. 10).

5.1: Introduction

The Malay women from the different ideological groups that are the focus of this thesis navigate a polarised socio-political context in their advocacy and reform work in Malaysia. This chapter provides an explanation of why and how polarisation in the socio-political context complicates the ability of the women activists to form cross-cutting alliances across the ideological divides of their groups. Understanding this wider political context will allow one to better appreciate the unexpected findings on the intersections in the women's understandings across the ideological divides of their groups, which will be discussed later in Chapters Seven and Eight. This chapter argues that political competition motivated politicians from the UMNO-led government to otherise their Malay political rivals, who were allied with non-Malay politicians, as 'liberal' Muslims. The political and religious elites leveraged key periods of socio-political uncertainty over the past 20 years to reaffirm the *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) narrative and framed 'liberal' Malay Muslims as a threat by associating them with non-Malay ethnic minorities and, by extension, with secular values. Consequently, the chapter argues that the label 'liberal' Muslim acquired an anti-Islam meaning in Malaysia. This wider political context in which pejorative labelling is weaponised by politicians and religious leaders to draw boundaries between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' sets the tone for culture wars in Malaysia. The pejorative label of 'liberal' Muslim is particularly salient in the political context, and it has also affected women's groups. The Islamic feminist group, Sisters in Islam (SIS), which utilise feminist and human rights discourses within an Islamic framework to promote pro-democratic values such equality, inclusiveness, and religious pluralism, has been especially vulnerable to being labelled 'liberal' by politicians and religious leaders. As the empirical chapters in this thesis later shows (Chapters Six to Eight), the 'liberal' label had promoted distrust and prejudice between the Islamic revivalist groups and the secular

multiracial and Islamic feminist groups, which the current generation of women activists have had to overcome.

Section 5.2 of this chapter is a single-authored and peer-reviewed journal paper that the author of this thesis had published in *Religion, State & Society* in 2021 for the purpose of inclusion in this thesis. The chapter concludes with reflections on the possible consequences of the pejorative understanding of the 'liberal' Muslim label on Malay women's groups in Malaysia, which are addressed in the subsequent empirical chapters.

5.2: Constructing the 'Liberal' Muslim Other: Ethnic Politics, Competition, and Polarisation[30]

RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY
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ARTICLE

Constructing the 'liberal' Muslim other: ethnic politics, competition, and polarisation in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This contribution extends the sectarianisation thesis to analyse the construction of the 'liberal' Muslim other in Malaysian politics. It argues that political competition, rather than religion, motivated elite Malay state actors to otherise their political rivals as 'liberal'. Elite state actors leveraged key periods of socio-political uncertainty between 1998 and 2020 to reaffirm dominant ethno-religious narratives and construct the meaning of 'liberal' as anti-Islam to retain political power. They framed 'liberal' Malays as a threat by associating them with non-Malay ethnic minorities and, by extension, with secular values. The contribution builds its argument with an analysis of competing ideas over three time periods, each constituting cumulative stages in the sectarianisation of the 'liberal' Muslim other: the 1998 pro-democracy Reformasi movement; religious freedom challenges in the 2000s; and the mounting electoral challenges to the Barisan Nasional government since the 2008 general elections. The analysis demonstrates that the construction of 'liberal' sectarian difference occurred despite the absence of a pre-existing 'liberal' Muslim identity available for manipulation. The contribution emphasises that sectarianisation can develop in different forms and over cumulative stages that are contingent on local-level complexities and political competition.

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5.2.1: Introduction to Journal Article

Political polarisations can be shaped, consolidated, and reproduced by distinctive contestations for change that are expressed in the public sphere over time. The simplest, and perhaps the most effective, way that political and social actors seek to distinguish and thus position themselves to influence others is through the discursive construction of sectarian differences, particularly during politically opportune or unstable periods. These politically oriented actors deploy ideas through various meaning-making processes, such as media engagement, protest rallies, and grassroots outreach, to either push for political change or maintain the status quo, as they compete for public support. By extending the sectarianisation thesis to Malaysia, this contribution argues that political legitimacy crises and the imperative of regime survival in the context of competitive ethnic politics drove the construction and manipulation of Malay Muslim identifications. Political competition motivated pro-establishment elite Malay political actors to otherise their Malay rivals as 'liberal' in ways that have contributed to polarisation in Malaysian politics. In this perspective, the constructed 'liberal' Muslim Other can be viewed as a consequence of the cumulative sectarianising interactions over time between political actors with opposing objectives – that is, interactions between the pro-establishment elite actors who acted to uphold dominant political logics and practices to maintain power, and the rival actors who pushed to alter them.

Since the 1998 pro-democracy Reformasi (Reform) movement in Malaysia, an underlying point of contention that has increasingly contributed to political polarisation is the notion of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) – i.e. Malays as indigenous to the land of Malaysia should be the ethnic group holding political power in accordance with its constitutionally mandated special position.[31] One group of actors, represented by the United Malays National Organisation (*Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu*, henceforth UMNO) that headed the ruling government for 61 years up till 2018, has long positioned itself as a defender of the

[31] All ethnic Malays are defined as Muslims in Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. This paper uses the terms Malay and Muslim interchangeably when discussing the Malaysian context.

bumiputera (indigenous) special position as enshrined in Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution.[32] On Peninsula Malaysia, where political polarisation has been more pronounced compared to the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, Malays constitute 59.7% of the population with Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities at 23.6% and 8.1% respectively (Penang Monthly 2015). For decades, the order of politics in Peninsula Malaysia was structured by the notion of *ketuanan Melayu* and pro-Malay affirmative action policies, both of which eventually became conflated with the Article 153 special position. This order was opposed by a different group of multiethnic actors that coalesced after Reformasi, most recently represented by the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) coalition that was elected to government in 2018. Among other pro-democracy reforms, this group advocated equal treatment for all ethnicities and emphasised needs-based assistance instead of pro-Malay policies.

Both political groups have held fundamentally different positions – this contribution will thereafter refer to the pro-*ketuanan Melayu* UMNO group as elites and the reform-oriented group as rivals to denote the primary form of polarising political competition, with three caveats to the usage of these terms. First, the two groups are not internally homogenous; in fact, both groups have had histories of intra-party power struggles. Nevertheless, strict party discipline, particularly within UMNO, ensured that upper echelon members dictated the party's pro-*ketuanan Melayu* positioning. Second, UMNO politicians are termed as elites because they had access to state power for most of the period under analysis in this contribution. While there are politicians within PH who are also political elites due to the oligarchic nature of Malaysian politics (e.g., former UMNO members, Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir Mohamed), they lost direct access to state power when they crossed over to the political opposition. Third, some religious figures are also elites due to their influence in state and society and can contribute to political polarisation; however, they are discussed separately in this contribution because while religious figures may appear united on the surface on Muslim issues, their political support for UMNO or PH in reality is more nuanced (see Hew 2020).

While the elites sought to 'reaffirm established narratives' on *ketuanan Melayu* to maintain its hold on power, the rivals promoted pro-democratic values such as equality to act as "approximate forceful projectiles that [could] shift the terms" of the political order (Martin

[32] While the term *bumiputera* is not mentioned in the Constitution, it is used colloquially to refer to Malays and aboriginal natives in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, who are mentioned as having a special position.

2014, p. 93). Each group garnered popular support in distinct electoral arenas that together account for most of the federal parliament seats, which one study referred to as Peninsula Malay and Peninsula Diverse arenas[33] – the Peninsula Malay arena is historically linked to the Sultan-controlled areas that today are semi-urban and Malay-majority while the Peninsula Diverse arena had economic migrations from China and India under British colonialism and today is urban and majority non-Malay (Ostwald and Oliver 2020). Crucially because ethnic minorities had shifted their electoral support to the reform-oriented rivals over the past three general elections in hopes for a post-racial Malaysia (Chin 2018), the Malay (and East Malaysian) vote became pivotal in determining electoral outcomes. The importance of the Malay swing vote in the Peninsula Malay arena to PH in the 2018 general election was made starkly evident with the historic first defeat of the UMNO-led government (Ostwald and Oliver 2020).

This contribution argues that the elites had to manage political legitimacy crises as ethnic minorities and Malays in the urban areas increasingly shifted their political loyalties to the rivals. Elites had to minimise the political threat posed by new credible Malay rivals, who also competed for Malay votes. Therefore, rather than being driven by religious considerations, elites were motivated by political competition to otherise their Malay rivals as 'liberal', which has contributed to polarisation both within the Malay group and in Malaysian politics. Central in this polarisation is the construction of a dominant ethno-religious narrative in which the elites argued that *ketuanan Melayu*, Malay special rights, and Islamic values were threatened by non-Muslim ethnic minorities and their 'liberal' Malay Muslim partners. As this contribution later shows, the elites through control of state power were able to leverage ensuing periods of uncertainty to reaffirm this dominant ethno-religious narrative to their advantage.

The contribution adopts a methodological approach of analysing historical trajectories of change and causation using secondary source materials (Mahoney 2010).[34] Using sectarianisation as a framework for analysis, the contribution examines competing ideas over significant periods of sociopolitical crises and uncertainty in recent history, namely, the pro-democracy Reformasi movement in the late 1990s; religious freedom challenges in the secular civil and Islamic court systems in the 2000s; and the mounting electoral challenges to UMNO

[33] See Ostwald and Oliver (2020) for the geographic distribution of these two electoral arenas.
[34] Ethics approval for this research was not required because there was no direct interaction with human subjects.

in the post-2008, 2013, and 2018 general elections period. The analysis begins with Reformasi as it represents a fundamental change in Malaysian politics where intersecting interests between Malay and ethnic minority political demands begin to develop, and which grew more relevant in the subsequent two time periods. Prior to Reformasi, the UMNO elites' primary Malay opposition came from the Islamist Parti Se-Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS) (Weiss 2004), along with intra-UMNO factional power struggles in the late 1980s (Singh 1991), both of which did not intersect with ethnic minority political demands. The three time periods are analysed as cumulative stages in the sectarianisation process during which the elites constructed the 'liberal' other as a threat to Malays.

Through analysis of the Malaysian case, the contribution adds to a more nuanced understanding of the sectarianisation process in non-Middle Eastern contexts: (1) despite the absence of a pre-existing 'liberal' Muslim identity already available for manipulation by elite state actors, sectarian difference can be constructed when there are other significant divisions (for example, a racially divided political system) and (2) in such contexts, the sectarianisation occurs over time, and rather than in a single stage, occurs across cumulative stages under facilitating conditions of political competition and sociopolitical crises. At the empirical level, the contribution also provides an explanation for the present-day salience of the 'liberal' Muslim as a pejorative category in Malaysian politics by locating the foundational sectarianising links in the previous periods of socio-political crises in recent history.

The contribution is organised as follows. The first section discusses the utility of extending the sectarianisation thesis to analyse the elites' construction of the 'liberal' Muslim Other. The second section provides a brief account of how *ketuanan Melayu* came to establish the dominant logics and practices of politics in Malaysia. The third section analyses the competing ideas around *ketuanan Melayu* in the construction of the 'liberal' Muslim Other over three cumulative stages of sectarianisation. The contribution concludes with reflections on the elites' instrumentalisation of the 'liberal' Muslim Other in the lead up to the collapse of the reform-oriented Pakatan Harapan government in 2020.

5.2.2: Sectarianisation: The Instrumental Role of Elites in Constructing the 'Liberal' Muslim Other

In the current Malaysian context, the terms 'liberal' and 'religious' have acquired specific meanings whereby certain values and norms that are associated with the term are believed by large numbers of Malay Muslims to be mutually exclusive. The Malay Muslim mainstream understanding of the term 'liberal' Muslim has a pejorative connotation of areligious freedom-seeking individuals being in opposition to Islamic tradition, values, and norms, while the term 'religious' Muslim has a positive connotation of pious Muslims upholding the tenets of Islam (Ibrahim 2014). This form of mainstream understanding has effectively rendered some Muslim reformist groups and individuals as an inauthentic 'liberal' Other in the Malay Muslim community (Saleem 2018). Those who have been rendered as 'liberal' include the Muslim feminist group, Sisters in Islam (SIS), the Muslim reformist group, Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF), and secular Malay activists such as Siti Kasim, all of whom had espoused pro-democratic values such racial equality, inclusiveness, and religious pluralism. The ideological differences around the role of Islam in governance have also come to be associated with the term 'liberal' and are very much a part of the vernacular grammar of public contention in Malaysia, particularly within the Malay Muslim community (Daniels 2017; Moustafa 2018).[35] As a result, the difference between 'liberal' Muslims and 'religious' Muslims in the Malay community is commonly perceived in Malaysian society as stemming from irreconcilable secular and religious worldviews.

One possible explanation for the pejorative understanding of the term 'liberal' is the influence of religious teachings. For instance, religious teachings that foster religious exclusivity (Liow 2014) can be implicated in the shaping of the pejorative meaning of the 'liberal' Other. However, religious understandings in themselves are inadequate as an explanation. First, religious understandings cannot explain why some Malay politicians from the reform-oriented rival group such as Anwar Ibrahim, who had credible Islamic roots as a former Islamic civil society leader and who still retained a large following from Islamist civil society groups (Daniels 2017), were so easily de-legitimised as 'liberal' by elites. Only 13% of Malays surveyed in November 2019 supported Anwar as the next prime minister despite public knowledge of a planned transition of power within the Pakatan Harapan government (Teoh

[35] These studies provide an excellent account of the current contents of the different world-views of the 'liberal' and religious Muslim groups in Malaysia.

2019). Second, it cannot explain why Islamist-oriented civil society groups such as the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, ABIM) or Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia (Organisation Ikram Malaysia, IKRAM) were never labelled as 'liberal', even though they engaged with secular civil society groups and members of the opposition coalition on a number of common issues such as good governance and were selectively critical of the *pro-ketuanan* Melayu government. The Islamist political party, PAS, was also never in danger of being labelled as 'liberal', even when it was part of the multiethnic opposition coalition (2008–2015) and positioned itself to be more inclusive with its 'PAS for all' slogan (Hamid and Razali 2015). As such, there are heterogenous and variable positions among the Islamist groups, as there are among Malay nationalists such as the UMNO elites. This heterogeneity, both within and between the different Muslim groups, means that there can be varying degrees of disagreement on what exactly would qualify as a 'religious' Muslim. This underscores an important feature in Malaysia – the construction of the 'liberal' Muslim as a pejorative category in Malaysian politics does not require an opposing and internally coherent 'religious' or 'conservative' Muslim category to be salient; as this contribution later shows, the 'liberal' Muslim pejorative category functions powerfully as a divisive tool when used to signal threat under changing contexts of political competition and socio-political crises.

In contrast, the sectarianisation thesis offers a framework for analysis that focuses on the political context to make visible the processes involved in making the 'liberal' Muslim Other salient in contemporary Malaysian politics. Sectarianisation is defined as 'an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular (religious) identity markers' (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 4). Hashemi and Postel's central argument is that elites in authoritarian or fragile political contexts have manipulated, and continue to manipulate, different Muslim identities and religious differences for the purpose of regime survival (Hashemi and Postel 2017). The focus on the political context and the role of elites avoids problematic essentialist assumptions about religion in politics, i.e., religion conceived as "the foundation of entrenched competition" between rival worldviews and as "an irrational force to be expelled from modern public life" (Hurd 2007, p. 647). Rather than conceive the 'liberal' Muslim sectarian difference as a consequence of irreconcilable secular-religious worldviews, sectarianisation locates the instrumental role of elite political actors, power relations, and the changing contexts, i.e., who are in positions of power to determine what kinds of identities become relevant, and when and why.

Sectarianisation is also a useful framework because there is evidence that UMNO elites have historically manipulated ethnic and religious identities in different ways. Scholarly works on Malaysian politics have shown that UMNO elites constructed a homogenised Malay Muslim majority in order to ensure continued support for the government over political rivals (Mohamad 2010); magnified intra-Muslim differences by labelling Islamist rival, PAS, as "parochial fundamentalists" (Liow 2004); and securitised Shia Muslim minorities as societal threats on claims of religious deviancy (Saleem 2018).

However, there are necessary caveats in extending the sectarianisation thesis to account for the recent salience of the 'liberal' Muslim other in Malaysian politics. First, the sectarianisation thesis was originally developed to challenge the Orientalist, and static, conceptions of a primordial hatred, rooted in the medieval period, between the Sunni and the Shiite Muslim sects in the Middle East (Hashemi and Postel 2017). Sunni and Shiite sects are existing Muslim identities already shaped through their respective traditions, cultures, and histories. The notion of 'liberal' Muslims, though, is a recent construct in Malaysia. One cannot speak of a pre-existing 'liberal' Muslim identity that was readily available for the elites' manipulation.[36] Apart from infrequent recent examples of self-identifications by Muslim reformists as 'liberal' (e.g. Kasim 2018), the vast majority of Malay Muslims do not self-identify nor are they compelled by the state to identify as 'liberal' Muslims, even if the UMNO-led government and parts of society had otherised Muslim groups and individuals as 'liberal'; for example, the Muslim feminist group SIS was labelled as 'liberal' and thus considered religiously deviant through a state fatwa (an Islamic ruling that is legally binding in Malaysia) in 2014. Yet it is exactly this vagueness of who would constitute the 'liberal' Muslim in Malaysia, apart from some commonalities such as showing support for pro-democratic values like racial equality, inclusiveness, and religious pluralism that would possibly describe other Muslims too, which allows it to be constructed as a powerful sectarianising category. Second, while there is an attempt in the recent academic literature to distinguish 'liberal' or 'progressive' Muslim identities from 'traditional' or 'conservative' Muslim identities based on their different interpretations of Islamic theology (e.g. Duderija 2017), the meanings of these constructed

[36] A related intra-Muslim division, but one that stayed at the religious elite level, emerged during the nineteenth century under British colonialism; it was based on religious leaders' different approaches to Islamic thought – i.e. *kaum tua* (traditionalist) and *kaum muda* (reformist) (see Rahim and Abd 2006). The religious polemics between these religious groups differed from the political polemics of the political groups discussed in this paper.

identities vary in different country contexts – unlike in Malaysia, liberals in a western context are not commonly perceived to be anti-Islam.

Nevertheless, the lack of a pre-existing 'liberal' Muslim identity in Malaysia, and a recognition that the meaning of this construct is context dependent, does not preclude the utility of the sectarianisation thesis in analysing the elites' construction of the 'liberal' Muslim Other. Instead, the sectarianisation thesis offers a framework to locate the instrumental role of elites that are mediated in and contingent to the changing nature of political competition and highlights the power struggles involved in the construction of Muslim sectarian difference. Instead of identities then, the contribution focuses on the processes where identifications are performed by elites in an attempt to construct and otherise a group for political reasons; these identifications can later be instrumentalised during critical periods (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

5.2.3: Ketuanan Melayu and the Dominant Order of Politics

Historically, the notion of *ketuanan Melayu* entailed elite-level acceptance of Malay political dominance in exchange for the recognition of *jus soli* citizenship rights for ethnic minorities at independence. The Malay elites in UMNO, Chinese elites from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Indian elites from the Malaysian Indian Association (MIC) negotiated a political understanding where the primacy of the ethno-religious identity of the Malays was enshrined in the 1957 Constitution.[37] In practice, governmental power was initially shared, and interethnic demands were addressed through genuine negotiations and compromises between the Malay and non-Malay elites (Mauzy 1993).

This interethnic power balance sharply changed after the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the aftermath of the 1969 post-election ethnic riots between the Malays and the Chinese. The NEP's objective was to increase Malay participation in the economy and alleviate Malay poverty, which the UMNO-led government believed was the root cause of the riots, through pro-Malay affirmative action initiatives (Chin 2018). Even though the NEP was rationalised as a means to diminish interethnic tension caused by socioeconomic inequality

[37] These three ethnic-based parties formed the core of the Barisan Nasional coalition that governed Malaysia till 2018.

(Jomo 2004), it also served to embody the specific constitutional provisions on Malay special position that in practice heightened ethnic distinctions between the Malays and non-Malays. The continuation of pro-Malay policies past the NEP's official expiration in 1990 cultivated the notion of *ketuanan Melayu* in the socio- political order.

There were obvious political imperatives in the UMNO elites' active cultivation of the *ketuanan Melayu* narrative. One, UMNO elites took credit for implementing and maintaining the pro-Malay policies that improved Malay living standards. Economists acknowledged that the NEP had indeed increased the proportion of Malay middle class, raised the educational levels of Malays and reduced Malay economic over-reliance on agriculture (Jomo 2004). Two, the elites used the narrative as a bulwark to differentiate itself from secular opposition rivals such as the Chinese-dominated party Democratic Action Party (Parti Tindakan Demokratik, DAP), which emphasised equal rights for all citizens and needs-based policies regardless of ethnicity. Three, the elites also used it to differentiate itself from the Islamist party PAS, which was a serious contender for the Malay vote in a context of religious revivalism amongst Malay Muslims during the 1970s and 1980s. The elites asserted that compared to PAS' economically backward and parochial Islamic outlook, only an UMNO-led government could ensure the country's economic progress while upholding the Malay group's political dominance and Islamic values. For example, UMNO under Mahathir Mohamed's first premiership (1981 to 2003) infused the logic of Islamic values with Malay civilisation and contrasted them with western liberal values during the Asian Values debate of the 1990s (Dupont 1996). UMNO, under Mahathir, deftly aligned itself with the increasingly influential Islamist grassroots groups that advocated for more Islamic values in governance, de-legitimised secular political opponents, and trumped Islamist rivals. As such, the notion of *ketuanan Melayu* over time became infused with *ketuanan Islam* (supremacy of Islam) sentiments as well (Chin 2018).

The cultivation of the *ketuanan Melayu* narrative allowed the elites to entrench their political hegemony with an underlying ethno-religious rationale that appealed to a majority of Malays, who gave them their vote. To this majority of Malays, the *ketuanan Melayu* ethno-religious narrative was logical and preferable because it had translated into Malay social mobility and progress and the protection of Islamic values.

5.2.4: Constructing the 'Liberal' Muslim Other

Stage 1: Shaping Competing Ideas in the Context of Reformasi

The first stage in the sectarianisation process occurred with the pro-democracy Reformasi social movement during which the competing ideas of the *ketuanan Melayu* ethno-religious narrative versus equal rights took shape. The dominant order of politics was stable only in so far as there was a continued perception of Malay social mobility and progress. The reality was that the elites used pro-Malay policies as avenues to consolidate their political positions through patronage and rent-seeking practices (Gomez and Jomo 1999). While the country's growth in the 1980s and the 1990s masked the negative impacts of such practices, the economic woes of the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis fuelled a growing social perception that it was mostly elite state actors and well-connected businesspeople from the three main ethnic groups who had benefited from the system. Two major developments related to the financial crisis shaped societal concerns around corruption and social inequity in Malaysia – neighbouring Indonesia's mass protests for political reforms in May 1998 that led to the fall of the thirty-year Suharto presidency, and the sacking of deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998.

The financial crisis and Suharto's fall amid public discontent over worsening economic conditions presented a politically opportune moment for Anwar (then part of the UMNO-led government) to press for reforms in Malaysia. Anwar, who also held the finance portfolio, was reportedly against the government's decision to bail out corporations linked to UMNO elites (Gomez 2002). These differences heightened existing tensions between pro-Mahathir and pro-Anwar factions within UMNO. By June 1998, Anwar openly warned that 'weakness in [Malaysia's] internal policies' could lead to regime change as had occurred in Indonesia (Richardson 1998). Anwar's sudden sacking from his cabinet and UMNO party positions was framed by the government as necessary due to his alleged sexual misconduct of sodomy, but in actuality was believed by political observers to be motivated by fears of a possible Mahathir ouster. The quick succession of events – out-bursts of protests over the Anwar's sacking; the media publicity over police investigations into Anwar's alleged sodomy; Anwar's arrest and reports of police brutality – coalesced into the large-scale Reformasi movement involving both Muslim and secular civil society groups, as well as opposition parties. The Indonesian mass protesters' primary concerns – *korupsi*, *kolusi* dan *nepotisme* (corruption, cronyism, and

nepotism) – became a rallying slogan for Reformasi in Malaysia. While there had been prior UMNO internal power struggles in the 1970s and 1980s (Mohamad 2007), none had resulted in a mass social movement involving diverse participants from the different ethnic groups the way Reformasi did. The movement's eventual manifestation in electoral politics was an opposition coalition with a newly created multiracial political party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR)[38] led by Anwar, with the Chinese-dominated DAP and Islamist PAS as partners.

Reformasi presented a compelling counter discourse that directly challenged the dominant *ketuanan Melayu* ethno-religious narrative that had been cultivated by the elites. Firstly, the counter discourse depicted the UMNO-led government as having reneged on its role as a protector of the Malays by being corrupt; corruption only benefitted the elites and non-elite Malays were left behind (Mohamad 2007). Secondly, it connected Anwar's treatment at the hands of the government, including being beaten by the police, with abuses of power. The Malay middle class perceived this as unusually cruel and unjust (Loh 2002). Thirdly, it offered an alternative vision to uphold Islamic values through democratic reforms that would benefit all of society. Anwar's earlier musings on *Islamic Madani* (modern Islam) centred on 'ideals of Islam such as justice, equitable distribution of wealth, fundamental rights and liberties' (Ibrahim 1996, 113) now appealed directly to growing Malay concerns. This was also aligned with the liberal democratic ideals of Anwar's ethnic minority political partners. The counter discourse then bound Reformasi's diverse participants with the recognition that democratic practices were needed to ensure respect of everyone's civil rights and good governance.

However, elites highlighted Anwar's moral failings and accused him of influencing his Malay supporters, mostly young professionals, to be ungrateful to UMNO who implemented pro-Malay policies that allowed for sponsorship of their university education. Mahathir's earlier rhetoric on Malay-Islamic values was re-activated in the elites' depiction of Anwar as a western 'liberal' stooge, immoral, and a false Islamic reformer who was dangerous to Malay unity (Kling 2006). When a group of Chinese civil society organisations submitted requests to the government to re-visit pro-Malay policies in 1999, the elites attributed it to Anwar's divisive

[38] The 1999 founding name of the party was Parti Keadilan Nasional; it was renamed PKR in 2003 after a merger with a smaller political party.

actions that had weakened Malays and emboldened ethnic minorities to break with the prevailing sociopolitical order rooted in *ketuanan Melayu* (Kling 2006).

Reformasi was a defining moment that fundamentally disrupted the nature of political contestations in Malaysia – Malays who came to recognise the limitations in the socio-political order forwarded an equal rights-centred counter discourse that challenged UMNO's careful cultivation of the *ketuanan Melayu* ethno-religious narrative. Still, Reformasi was a predominantly urban phenomenon – while it dented UMNO's Malay support in the 1999 general elections, it did not translate into significant Malay support for Anwar's political party. Ethnic minorities also largely backed the UMNO-led government, fearing regime change would spark anti-Chinese violence as had occurred in Indonesia (Chin and Wong 2009).

Stage 2: Connecting Religious Freedom Challenges to Ketuanan Melayu

The second stage in the sectarianisation process was the highly public contentious court disputes over religious freedoms through much of the 2000s that surfaced growing ethnic minority disaffection with the *ketuanan Melayu* status quo. Apart from politicians, the second stage also involved civil society activists, litigants, and lawyers who politicised the issue of rights infringements. The changing context proffered opportunities for non-state actors to forward competing conceptions of individual rights versus culturally specific rights. This magnified both inter-ethnic and intra-Muslim distrust, which sharpened societal perceptions of ideological differences over the role of Islam in governance.

This was in part due to Malaysia's dual legal civil and sharia (Islamic law) court systems that were 'hardwired' to produce legal tensions, particularly after the Article 121 (1A) amendment to the Constitution in 1988 (Moustafa 2018, p. 155). Where before, sharia court rulings could be reviewed by the federal secular civil courts, this amendment delineated the two jurisdictions.[39] Furthermore, Reformasi had awakened Malaysians' political consciousness and civil society activism burgeoned, and the proliferation of alternative online media spaces allowed for political discussion outside of state-controlled media avenues (Moustafa 2018). These developments saw litigants and their lawyers more willing to publicise their grievances,

[39] 121(1A) amendment stated that high courts in the civil legal system do not have jurisdiction in any matters that are within the jurisdiction of the sharia courts. The Malaysian Constitution uses the word 'syariah', the Malay spelling of sharia.

which attracted domestic and international media attention. The court disputes generally emerged from religious bureaucratic management of Muslim affairs that affected ethnic minorities and areligious Malays' religious freedoms. Non-Muslims, who had no legal standing in sharia courts, appealed to secular civil courts when faced with issues that intersected both secular and Islamic legal jurisdictions.[40] In almost all of the cases, the civil courts ultimately deferred to the prior judgements of the sharia courts or decided that Article 121(1A) meant that the proper venue to review certain cases would be the sharia court (Moustafa 2018).

For ethnic minorities and reform-oriented Malays, Reformasi's ideal of democratic reform, with its emphasis on justice and protection of rights and liberties, was rejuvenated with each court dispute. This time, the central idea forwarded by reform-oriented groups was that the erosion of secularity in the Malaysian polity was a root cause for the individual rights infringements by religious bureaucracies of the state. The solution then lay in emphasising the historical proofs of the secular nature of the state and upholding the Constitution as the supreme law of the state, which should render sharia law subordinate to secular civil law.[41] Reformasi's reform-oriented participants – Chinese-dominated DAP and secular civil society groups – actively furthered such ideas. In 2006 DAP spearheaded a resolution calling for the repeal of Article 121 (1A), which even received support from the UMNO-led government's ethnic minority ministers. Secular civil society groups formed the Article 11 coalition, which organised public events centred on highlighting the injustices faced by ethnic minorities (Moustafa 2018).

On the other hand, Reformasi's Malay partners – Islamist PAS and Muslim civil society groups – coalesced to defend the autonomy of the sharia courts from outside interference. The central idea forwarded by these groups was that Muslims had to rise and defend themselves from the secular-liberal onslaught or else lose their ability to manage their own religious affairs. For example, the president of PAS claimed that "the position of Islam [had never] been as strongly challenged as it is today" (Hadi cited in Moustafa 2018, p. 102). An umbrella group of more than 70 Muslim civil society organisations called the Defenders of Islam (*Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Pembela Islam,* PEMBELA) was formed specifically to oppose the Article 11 secular-oriented coalition. It asserted that "since Independence forty-nine years ago, Muslims

[40] See Moustafa (2018) for an in-depth discussion of such cases.
[41] See such arguments outlined by Malaysian solicitor Tommy Thomas (Thomas 2005), who later became the first non-Muslim Attorney-General under the PH coalition government in 2018.

have lived in religious harmony with other religions. Now certain groups and individuals have exploited the climate of tolerance and are interfering as to how we Muslims should practice our religion. [...] The interfaith groups and the current Article 11 groups are some of the unwarranted attempts to attack Islam in the name of universal human rights" (PEMBELA cited in Moustafa 2018, p. 104). Even Muslim civil society groups like ABIM that had rallied to garner support for Anwar during Reformasi, now mobilised their considerable grassroots reach to get Malays to sign petitions opposing the secular reform-oriented groups. Furthermore, starting at the height of these civil society contestations in 2006, Malays were also explicitly warned of the internal threat posed by deviant 'liberal' Malays by various state religious bureaucracies (JAIS 2016). The same themes of western secular interference and false 'liberal' reformers that were articulated by UMNO elites during Reformasi now emerged in this context – this time articulated by Muslim civil society groups and the religious bureaucracies. PEMBELA's depiction of a secular threat clearly resonated with its Malay constituency – it gathered 700k signatures compared to the 20k signatures collected by Article 11 (Moustafa 2018).

In addition to the religious freedom court disputes that involved Hindu Indians during this period, several Hindu temples were also demolished by local-level authorities in 2007 on the basis that they were illegally built. The failure of the UMNO-led government to intervene despite appeals by Indian community leaders culminated in a massive street protest organised by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) to highlight systemic oppressions suffered by Indian minorities due to pro-Malay policies. The government dispersed the protest with force and arrested several Hindraf leaders for threatening national security. The elites then demonised Hindraf as violent traitors for protesting pro-Malay policies. The elites' portrayal of Hindraf as traitors was repeated via the state-controlled mainstream media (Lee 2008). At UMNO's 2006 and 2007 general assemblies that were televised live, an UMNO elite, Hishamuddin Hussein, brandished the Malay dagger *keris* to symbolically represent Malay sovereignty, which ethnic minorities regarded as a threat of violence (Lee 2008). The assemblies also featured speeches by other elites who pejoratively referred to ethnic minorities as *pendatang* (recent immigrants) and attacked them for daring to question Malay special rights (Chin 2018).

The sectarianisation stage in this context was crucial in connecting polarising societal conceptions of rights to competitive party politics. At the civil society level, reform-oriented

activists emphasised individual rights and civil liberties to push for equal protections through logics of a secular-liberal democracy while the pro-sharia activists emphasised culturally specific community rights through logics of a Malay-Muslim dominated state. In this context of heightened interethnic tension, the elites identified the reform-oriented ethnic minorities as 'liberal' troublemakers who threatened to undermine Islam's position in Malaysia. For the pro-sharia activists, upholding Islam meant ensuring Malays retained political power. This time, Reformasi's Malay supporters, such as ABIM and PAS, were on the side of the pro-sharia group and they were instrumental in whipping up public concern over the 'liberal' threat to Islam in Malaysia. This enabled UMNO elites to directly speak to this public concern by reaffirming the *ketuanan Melayu* ethno-religious narrative while promoting UMNO as the only Malay political party equipped for the task of defending the Malay-Muslim position. Since Islamist groups served to spearhead fears over the 'liberal' threat, they were not sectarianised as 'liberal' by the elites even when they were critical of the UMNO-led government; indeed, these groups made it easier for UMNO elites to leverage this context to associate and de-legitimise its political rivals based on the perceived threat posed by the rivals' purportedly 'liberal' pro-democratic values.

Stage 3: Consolidating the 'Liberal' Other in the Context of UMNO's Electoral Challenges

The third stage in the sectarianisation process occurred in a context of growing electoral challenges to UMNO and it served to consolidate the otherising work by elites in the previous two stages. While the elites appeased the pro-sharia rights activists, they alienated the ethnic minorities who shifted their votes to the opposition coalition led by the reform-oriented rivals (Chin 2018). In 2008, the UMNO-led ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN), lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time; and in 2013, BN retained power, but lost the popular vote. As the dominant party in the ruling coalition that claimed to represent Malays and manage ethnic minority needs, this represented a legitimacy crisis for UMNO. UMNO faced the choice of trying to win back ethnic minority support or shoring up its Malay voter base. After initial attempts in 2009 at projecting a more inclusive image through the 1Malaysia concept of Malaysians First, the elites reverted to the logics and practices of *ketuanan Melayu* under pressure by pro-Malay rights groups and internal party pressures; plans to alter pro-Malay economic policies were aborted (O'Shannassy 2013). By 2013, it was evident that ethnic minorities had largely abandoned the BN coalition over unequal race-based policies, in what the elites referred to as the 'Chinese tsunami' (BBC 2013).

In addition to the rivals' ability to attract ethnic minorities, they also won over Malays concerned about issues of social inequity and governance. For the elites, regime survival necessitated securing the East Malaysian vote through patronage practices while minimising the loss of Malay support in Peninsula Malaysia through "collective patronage or club goods" where targeted benefits and social-assistance spending were assiduously allocated in the federal budget during election years (Weiss 2019, p. 49). The elites also amplified Malay fears of losing such club goods to underscore the perception of threat posed by non-Muslim ethnic minorities and their 'liberal' Malay partners.

During this period there was a noticeable increase in explicit references to 'liberal' Malays. For example, Najib Razak, UMNO president and then prime minister, asserted during an Islamic event that Muslims were under threat due to the spread of a 'new religion' whose core beliefs were human rights, secularism, and liberalism; this 'new religion' rejected Islamic norms under the guise of human rights (Malay Mail Online 2014). Najib also associated 'liberal' Muslims with LGBT groups and claimed that 'liberal ideas' would ruin Muslim identity (Today 2015). Furthermore, elites also warned that Malays' failure to support UMNO would lead to an eventual actualisation of the rivals' stated intent to abolish pro-Malay policies; they claimed this would lead to Chinese dominance in the economic and political spheres. This claim was repeated at the height of a protracted political crisis over allegations of corruption in the state development entity 1MDB, which were targeted at Najib; elites framed the criticism as fuelled by an anti-Malay and anti-Islam agenda by Chinese-led rivals (Kamal 2015). In this manner, the elites framed their Malay rivals as 'liberal' sell-outs to ethnic minority rivals who had their own agenda for political dominance.

During this period, the state religious bureaucracies were also instrumental in bolstering UNMO's depiction of the 'liberal' threat through propagation of religious sermons. Although the religious bureaucracy may have been motivated to do this to "standardise interpretations of Islam and limit intra-religious differences so as to bolster its own authoritative position", the religious bureaucracies' sectarianising discourse on the 'liberal' threat was similar to the UMNO elites' (Saleem 2018, p. 327). For example, in a 2016 sermon amid the ongoing 1MDB political scandal, the Islamic Department of Selangor (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, JAIS) warned its congregants that liberalism was an ideology in which freedoms without limits was central and this had crippled the minds of Muslims. According to JAIS, 'liberals' claimed that Islam limited progress; 'liberals' opposed the implementation of Islamic law because it was

unconstitutional; and 'liberals' believed that it was unfair and oppressive to implement Islamic law in a multiracial country like Malaysia (JAIS 2016).[42] In this manner, JAIS re-evoked the spectre of the 'liberal' threat on Islam in Malaysia, a public concern already shaped by the religious freedom court contestations during the mid-2000s. At the political level, UMNO elites associated their Malay and non-Malay rivals represented by PH with this 'liberal' threat.

Nevertheless, this rhetoric was insufficient to stem UMNO's mounting electoral challenges. However, when regime change occurred in the 2018 general election (GE-14), partly due to the Malay swing vote to the rivals, it was not because of a Malay endorsement of a new political order rooted in racial equality (Ostwald and Oliver 2020). Rather, the Malay swing vote was due to a combination of economic woes; a rejection of Najib's involvement in the 1MDB scandal; and nostalgia for leadership by former UMNO elites such as Mahathir who had crossed over to the rivals. In the post-GE14 context, initial attempts within UMNO to rebrand the party around interethnic inclusivity were rejected by most elites, who doubled down on the *ketuanan Melayu* narrative to win back Malay support.

While the elites no longer held state power, they were nevertheless equipped with a formidable rhetorical arsenal in the form of an established and readily deployable pejorative understanding of the reform-oriented rivals as the 'liberal' other. Tellingly, the first ethno-religious controversy that emerged soon after the regime change was over a PH Malay minister's purported attempt to hire an openly gay Malay press officer; the officer later claimed that he was not hired officially but the damage was done. Through much of 2018 and 2019 UMNO, now in the opposition, cast aspersions on the PH government's ability to uphold Islam and tackle the spread of LBGT culture (Reduan 2018). When public controversy arose over the choice of topic at a school debate competition (i.e. homosexuality and the need to rewrite the Quran), UMNO explicitly linked this to an example of misled 'liberal' Malays falling victim to the 'liberal' agenda forwarded by Chinese-led DAP and pro-liberal groups; UMNO stressed that it would not support PH in leading the government, as the party was spreading the 'liberal agenda' (UMNO 2019).

[42] This was conveyed in an official Friday sermon by JAIS entitled 'Liberal Understanding Ruins the Islamic Creed' in February 2016.

UMNO elites also instrumentalised Malay fears over marginalisation as the new PH government tried to forge a post-racial direction for the country. The elites only had to point to decisions and proposed changes by the new government – e.g. the first non-Malay Attorney-General appointment; plans to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – as evidence that *ketuanan Melayu*, Malay special rights and Islamic values were threatened by non-Muslim ethnic minorities and their 'liberal' Malay partners.

With each ensuing ethno-religious controversy in 2019, polls showed that Malays became sceptical of PH's commitment to preserve Malay rights.[43] In this context of heightened interethnic distrust, the BN coalition, led by UMNO, won four out of five by- elections in 2019. When the elites returned to government in March 2020 through the new Malay-dominated alliance, Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN), with break-away politicians from PH and PAS, it was on the back of significant support from the Malay ground.

5.2.5: Concluding Remarks to Journal Article[44]

As Mabon suggests in the afterword to this collection, although the sectarianisation thesis thus far has been used to analyse the manipulation of sectarian identities in the Middle East, there is nothing to prevent the application of its conceptual toolkit to countries elsewhere. This contribution has taken this objective one step further by extending the sectarianisation thesis to analyse the elites' strategic construction of the 'liberal' Muslim Other in a context where no such identity had previously existed. Barring a pre-existing 'liberal' Muslim identity available for manipulation, key factors relevant to sectarianisation processes were nevertheless evident in the three cumulative sectarianising stages discussed in this contribution – a society divided by interethnic tensions; legitimacy deficits suffered by the elites as ethnic minorities and a segment of Malays shifted their political allegiance to the reform-oriented rival coalition; and the elites' political imperatives for regime survival. As such, the entrenched race-based political system and the constitutional provisions for Malay special position that served to heighten interethnic differences also likely exacerbated intra-Muslim sectarianisation as political competition increased.

[43] See Saleem (2020) for an analysis of key ethno-religious controversies in 2019 that contributed to a context of heightened interethnic distrust.
[44] The published journal article ends at this section.

The sectarianisation process involved in the construction of the 'liberal' other was sparked by the Reformasi movement which brought pro-democratic values of equality, freedom, and universal human rights to the centre of Malaysian politics. Elites constructed 'liberal' Malays as an anti-Islam threat by associating them with non-Malay minorities and by extension with secular values so as to politically de-legitimise them. In a context of UMNO's electoral struggles and then its sudden defeat in GE-14, the constructed 'liberal' Muslim Other became logical and believable to enough Malays. The fact that the elites, armed with such rhetorical arsenal, returned to government less than two years after their historic electoral defeat, indicates that the pejorative meaning of the 'liberal' Muslim Other and its use in Malaysian politics has been consolidated. However, this constructed meaning – while consolidated – is by no means fixed. New civil society initiatives to reclaim the label 'liberal' have emerged (see Tan 2019a). As such, this contribution contends that the constructed 'liberal' Muslim other in Malaysia is a contemporary manifestation of an on-going power struggle for the pivotal Malay Muslim vote in a politically polarised context.

5.3: Malay Women's Groups and the 'Liberal' Muslim Other

How does this context of ethnic politics, the pejorative understanding of the 'liberal' Muslim Other, and the on-going power struggle for the pivotal Malay Muslim vote affect Malay women's groups in Malaysia? As the preceding section showed, several civil society groups in Malaysia contributed to the polarising rhetoric in the public sphere over the purported 'liberal' threat to Islam. This was particularly the case during the 2000s when the highly publicised court disputes spurred advocacy efforts by activists to forward different competing societal visions over the role of Islam in governance. As Chapters One and Two highlighted, since the 1970s, the Islamic revivalist groups, including through the efforts of the women's wings of ABIM and IKRAM, had built considerable grassroots and Islamic education networks to socialise Malays to Islamic norms and to advocate for a system of governance based on Islamic norms and principles, a development referred to as Islamisation (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). Islamisation brought about an "intensification of Islamic influence on social, cultural, economic and political relations" (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010, p. 136). The Malaysian state responded to this bottom-up approach of Islamisation by Islamic civil society groups with its top-down approach of Islamisation by facilitating the expansion of Islamic religious bureaucracies and the legal reach of Islamic law (Saleem 2018).

Islamisation reinforced the political identity construct where all ethnic Malays are defined as Muslims in Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia at the social level. The political identity construct seeped into the social consciousness of Malays wherein it became unthinkable for a Malay to not also be a Muslim. One of the first court cases in the 2000s to gain widespread public attention was over a Malay woman's bid to convert from Islam to Christianity (see Kortteinen 2008). For some pro-Malay and Islamic civil society groups such as the Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Muslim Solidarity Front, ISMA), the threat of an erosion of *ketuanan Melayu* principle was akin to diminishing Islam's status in society. For these Islamic civil society groups, their agenda of upholding Islamic values in society could only be met by ensuring that Malays hold the seat of political power. In this social climate, even Islamic groups, like ABIM, which supported the pro-democracy movement Reformasi in 1998, were concerned enough in the 2000s over fears of secularisation to contribute to polarising political rhetoric. As Chapter Six later shows, the Islamic women activists rarely adopt oppositional positions against state religious bureaucrats openly in the public sphere because they do not wish to undermine the Syariah law system in Malaysia. On the other side, Islamic feminist group SIS, expanded its advocacy work from looking primarily at Islamic family law, women's rights, and domestic violence done in the name of Islam to include taking public positions on larger human rights issues of fundamental liberties, freedom of religion and expression – for example, to highlight injustices experienced by Muslim apostates and transgenders in Malaysia. The expansion of SIS's work to incorporate a secular human rights perspective into Islamic feminism led the Malaysian state to securitise them as a 'liberal' threat (Saleem 2018).

However, to frame Malay women activists as approaching their work only in oppositional ways based on their ideological leanings – i.e., they function either through a secular or religious lens – pre-supposes an inevitable social conflict between them. This secular-religious frame negates the possibilities of women engaging in negotiations and consensus building through trust-building, and social learning. Such a frame also neglects the fact that ideologically different women's groups operate in the same public space, perhaps even having to engage or interact with each other. It also negates the possibility that the ideological boundaries of these groups can be shaped and re-shaped through inter-group interactions in the course of their work. Given this, several questions come to mind that will be addressed in the subsequent empirical chapters (Six to Eight) in this thesis. Is there a social cost to the 'liberal' Muslim label? Could the fear of social stigmatisation due to the 'liberal' Muslim label make women from Islamic civil society groups less willing to openly engage and work together with non-

Malays, secular civil society groups or reform-oriented individuals on pertinent social issues, and vice versa?

5.4: Conclusion

This chapter showed why and how political and religious elites constructed a pejorative understanding of the 'liberal' Muslim Other as anti-Islam, in a context of increasingly contentious racial politicking. The elites used this pejorative label as a political tool to create social and political divides to maintain their hold on political power. They leveraged key periods of socio-political uncertainty to reaffirm the *ketuanan Melayu* narrative and framed 'liberal' Malays as a threat by associating them with non-Malay ethnic minorities and, by extension, with secular values. However, when political and religious elites successfully label Muslim reformists such as Muslim feminists from SIS as 'liberal' and hence religiously 'deviant', they also consequently rigidify the boundaries of socially acceptable beliefs, attitudes, and actions of Malay Muslim women activists in ways that intersect with other long-existing social divisions of race, class, and gender in Malaysia. The marked uptick in occurrences of culture wars related to ethno-religious identities played out at the national level in recent years contribute and reinforce polarising societal attitudes about racial inclusivity, equality, individual and community rights (Saleem 2020). This chapter explained the wider political context in which pejorative labelling is weaponised by politicians and religious leaders to draw boundaries between the 'sacred' and the 'secular', which sets the tone for culture wars in Malaysia that the women activists must navigate in the course of their advocacy and reform work. As the next empirical chapter shows, polarising societal attitudes shaped by this wider political context both influence and constrain the actions of the Malay women activists, which correspondingly delineate the boundaries of their ideological groups. The next chapter analyses the key tensions between the women activists that act as a barrier to building trust between ideologically different Malay women's groups. The analysis pays close attention to the women's perspectives on ideological differences, past experiences of contention, and the political and religious contexts to better understand why the women may believe they have reasons to be distrustful of each other.

Chapter Six

Tensions Between Malay Women Groups

We do not agree to the fact that we can interpret it [Islamic doctrine] as we feel – Alia, Wanita IKRAM activist

6.1: Introduction

The overarching aim of the thesis is to interrogate whether the Malay women activists can develop relations of trust to form alliances that cuts across the ideological divides of their groups. The previous chapter argues that ideological differences among Malay Muslims in Malaysia have become more pronounced over the past two decades due to socio-political polarisation exacerbated by toxic ethnic politics and increasing electoral competition. The Malay women activists in this research are arguably subject to social and political forces that both influence and constrain their advocacy work. This empirical chapter analyses the key tension between the women activists that act as a barrier to building trust between ideologically different Muslim women's groups. Tensions centre around the religious authority of the Syariah (Islamic) legal system, and they are shaped by the ideological beliefs of the women's groups as well as perceptions of threat shaped by the political context. In politically contentious situations, perceptions of threat informed by a history of harmful or difficult experiences can trigger fears that ignite latent tensions between social groups (Sztompka 1999). In these situations, tensions between groups can manifest as feelings of distrust and actions of non-cooperation and non-compromise (Govier 1997; Bar-Tal and Alon 2016).

As Chapters One and Five highlighted, polarising perceptions of threat in Malaysian civil society were particularly heightened during the contentious religious freedom court cases in the 2000s. Recent history serves as a form of collective memory that can "cause oversensitivity among the society members which will lead to a search for information that points out potential threats or dangers" (Bar-Tal and Alon 2016, p. 325). These perceptions of threat get re-evoked each time an ethno-religious controversy is amplified in the public sphere by politicians, religious leaders, the media, and activists. Such identity politics over race, gender and religion have been a longstanding aspect of Malaysian politics (Liow 2009), and markedly increased after the UMNO-led government lost power in 2018 in its first loss since the country's independence (Saleem 2020). Therefore, in addition to divisive forces driven by ideological

beliefs of women's groups, the role of identity politics in the sectarianisation of 'liberal' Muslim Other also compound the problem of threat perception in Malay women's activism (Chapter Five). The institutionalisation of social and political hierarchies, shaped by dominant beliefs on *ketuanan Melayu*, the role of Islam in governance and Malay culture, then complicates the building of trustful relations between the women groups that are necessary for cooperation and compromise on social problems that intersect gender and religion. As such, the conditions for women activists to be distrustful of each other are embedded in ideological differences, past experiences, and the political context.

Using the decolonial feminist standpoint analytical lens, the chapter analyses the tension between the women activists. The chapter argues that the tension over the religious authority vested in the Syariah legal system constitutes the key overarching tension that shapes other tensions between the women. The women's advocacy is ultimately underpinned by different imperatives – one side seeks to maintain the legitimacy and credibility of the established religious authority while the other side seeks to check, apply pressure for reforms, and hold authority to public account instead. The chapter also analyses the women's different conceptions of gender roles, which they use to articulate the boundaries of their group difference.

6.2: Who has the Authority to Define Islam?

The Syariah legal system in Malaysia governs Muslims in three main areas under Syariah law: personal and family law; matters related to religious practice; and offenses deemed to be against the precepts of Islam (Shuaib 2012). Under the UMNO-led government, the Syariah legal system was expanded – through the proliferation of Islamic agencies at the federal and state levels of government and an increase in a host of enforceable legislation for Islamic offenses[45] – "as a showcase of successful state promotion of Islam in society" (Mohamed 2010a, p. 366). The Islamic women activists from the Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM, who advocate for the centrality of Islamic values in society, tend to place trust in the Syariah legal system to uphold justice in matters pertaining to the religious lives of Muslims. The established religious authorities are those associated with the Syariah legal system, which include the

[45] Some examples of Islamic offenses are "alcohol consumption, gambling, eating during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan and dating between unmarried couples" (Mohamed 2010a, p. 366).

royal-appointed and salaried religious bureaucrats from the chief Islamic scholar (*mufti*), Islamic scholars (*ulama*), and the Syariah judges (*kadi*).[46] On the other hand, the Malay women activists from SIS and the secular multiracial groups tend to adopt a more critical view because they believe that male biases within the Syariah legal system prevent it from being more responsive to societal changes which in turn contribute to occurrences of injustice in society. The difference in their approaches to the established religious authority constitute a key tension between the women activists. This tension was most evident between the women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM, and the Islamic feminist group SIS as the Malay women activists from the secular and multiracial groups tend to avoid commenting on and engaging directly with religious authority in their advocacy work.

6.2.1: An Alternative View of Islam

> We have to be a part of that conversation because for as long as we're not in that conversation, then other people will be the ones…to define what Islam is for us. You know, Islam is this, Islam is that, and we're saying that no, in our lived realities and our upbringing and our learning of Islam, you know, this is what we understand Islam to be. So, that's why we're asserting our place as authorities to speak, as well, about Islam – Najwa, SIS activist

The women activists from SIS regard their advocacy work as presenting an alternative view of Islam, one that accounts for the experiences of women and other minority groups. SIS activist Qistina explained that their views are considered by both themselves and others as "alternative" because they differ from the institutionalised "official" view of Islam. The alternative view approach by SIS is underpinned by the Islamic feminist argument that the Syariah legal system in many contemporary Muslim societies is dominated by *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) interpretations, which were developed during the classical period of Islam (Wadud 2021).

[46] The Malay rulers (Sultans) in the Malaysian Federation are the heads of Islam in their respective states and they have authority over appointments in the Syariah system, including the appointment of the state Muftis. The Malay rulers also have a final say on whether the *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) formulated by councils within the religious bureaucracy become legally binding on Malaysian Muslims in the respective state jurisdictions (Saleem 2018). Other forms of religious authority who operate outside of the Syariah system but have influence in society include the *ulama* in the Islamist political party, PAS, and celebrity *ustaz* and *ustazah* (male and female religious teachers) on television and social media; under Syariah law, the non-state *ulama* and *ustaz/ah* must obtain a license, but some manage to operate without official permission (Müller 2015; Musa 2020).

Through the privileging of elite male scholars in Islamic exegesis, philosophy and legal interpretative work in the classical period, patriarchy became embedded in Islamic knowledge production where women's (and non-elite men's) voices were largely absent (Ayubi 2019). For the SIS activists then, they as women hold the authority to put forward their alternative views because their views are informed by legitimate sources of knowledge. The sources of legitimate knowledge in SIS advocacy are derived from (1) Islamic feminist scholarship that adopts gender as a category of analysis in the critical reading of Islamic texts and (2) the lived realities of Muslim women as the basis for assessing whether a Syariah legislation adheres to the Islamic ethos of justice and equality (Wadud 2021) and (3) human rights principles as defined in international declarations and treaties by intergovernmental agencies like the United Nations. SIS activist, Siti reasoned that the alignment of *fiqh* with these secular rights-based mechanisms is important "because they [human rights] also shape our modern world". Hence, their approach is congruent with the secular feminist principles discussed in Chapter Three, with the difference being that SIS also deploys religious reinterpretations for its positions. However, because SIS engages with religious reinterpretations, SIS activist Najwa explained that Malays mistook it for a "Muslim-based organisation" when SIS regards itself foremost as a "feminist-based organisation" working on women's rights within an Islamic framework.

This distinction mattered to SIS because their positioning as a feminist-based organisation enables them to take public positions on topics that intersect gender and religion in direct opposition to the established religious authority in the federal and state Islamic agencies. This approach earned them scrutiny and by 2014, SIS was labelled 'liberal', deemed religiously deviant, and proscribed under a *fatwa* (Islamic law) by the established religious authority in the Selangor state (Saleem 2018). SIS chose to challenge the *fatwa* that declared it deviant in the civil courts on grounds that the *fatwa* is unconstitutional, rather than attempt to seek redress in the Syariah courts (Malay Mail 2022). Their attempt to seek judicial review in the civil courts over decisions made within the Syariah legal system echoes the past contention in the religious freedom courtroom battles – just as with the SIS case[47], the lawyers and activists from Islamic groups in the religious freedom cases defended Syariah decisions on the basis that the civil courts could not adjudicate or review matters pertaining to Islamic affairs, which were deemed

[47] The case is still making its way through the civil court appeals system as of 2023.

to be wholly within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts due to a 1988 constitutional amendment (Malay Mail 2022).[48]

6.2.2: Credible and Legitimate Religious Authority

The ideological belief held by Islamic revivalist groups that the Syariah legal system should have equal standing with the civil legal system means that the Islamic women activists are reluctant to criticise the Syariah legal system and the established religious authority. Past court challenges, the ongoing discourse in segments of the legal community that sought to shift the legal interpretation of the 1988 constitutional amendment and uphold the secular nature of the state,[49] and sensationalised media accounts of creeping Islamisation and strict Islam have contributed to magnified fears over Muslim intolerance, extremism, and threats to freedom and fundamental liberties (Nor and Gale 2021). In such a context, the Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM choose instead to focus on the Syariah system's positives.

> The *ulama*…whatever *fatwa*…that they have given out, I'm sure it's been done based on…consideration of all aspects. So, they [referring to SIS] have basically adjusted the principles based on the current thinking. So, we…do not agree to the fact that we can interpret it as we feel, as we think because we do not understand all the different principles…that have been taken in order to derive that kind of laws in Islam…So, we do not define it ourselves, we based [our thinking] on what the *fatwas* was in the country – Alia, Wanita IKRAM activist

In contrast to the oppositional stance with established religious authority adopted by SIS, the Islamic women activists express trust in the Syariah legal system including the interpretative work of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) who formulate the *fatwas*. For instance, Alia from Wanita IKRAM, trust that the *ulama* considers all aspects of a problem when formulating a *fatwa*.

[48] Prior to 1988, the Syariah courts were understood in the legal community to be subordinate to the civil courts. This understanding was effectively reshaped with the 1988 constitutional amendment to Article 121(1A) which stated that civil courts "shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah Courts." Recent judgments interpreted the 1988 amendment to mean that the civil and Syariah courts have equal standing under the Malaysian constitution (Tew 2011, p. 5).

[49] A recent example of this type of argument made by a former judge of the Court of Appeal (civil jurisdiction) is Yunus 2020.

Notably, she dismisses the religious interpretations of SIS activists as based on "current thinking" and feelings, suggesting that their interpretations are shaped more by their ideological worldviews that are contingent on the present time and space rather than rooted in timeless Islamic principles. Just as Alia does regard SIS as possessing the authority to engage in religious interpretations, she includes herself in that category too by using the word "we" to argue that laypersons lack an understanding of the different principles behind formulation of a *fatwa*. In this manner, Alia and the other Islamic women activists differentiates the *ulama* from laypersons like SIS activists and themselves – thus, the interpretations made by the established religious authorities carry more weight in their eyes than those by SIS activists.

6.2.3: Emboldened-Defensive Dynamic Over Religious Authority

> SIS has always been demonised as some of our staff don't wear *tudung*. And we don't speak Arab [Arabic language], we didn't go to al-Azhar. So, what rights do you [SIS] have to speak on Islam? …So, they just discredit us when we try to propagate our version of Islam – Siti, SIS activist

The question of who holds the authority to define Islam is one that SIS confronts regularly. In contrast to SIS activists, the staff in the religious bureaucracies are formally trained in prestigious universities of higher Islamic learning within Malaysia and abroad such as the Al-Azhar in Egypt (Hamid 2018). Coupled with personal choices by SIS activists like not wearing the *tudung* (headscarf) which conflicts with the mainstream understanding in Malaysia that *tudung* is a religious obligation for Muslim women, SIS activists end up having to work harder to establish credibility (Basarudin 2016).

Notably the Malay women from the secular multiracial groups see SIS as charting a necessary path in Malaysian activism, especially since in their own work they tend to avoid speaking on religion. Yet they acknowledge that large segments of the Malaysian Muslim society are not receptive to the alternative views forwarded by SIS. Hani from Dear Her describes SIS as a "radical organisation" because SIS activists function as conversation starters on difficult or culturally taboo topics. For example, at the time of the research for this thesis, several secular multiracial women's groups were focused on raising awareness about the issue of female

genital mutilation (FGM) in Malaysia. SIS was the first women's group to address the aspect of Islamic belief in the practice of FGM through public seminars and to advocate unambiguously in favour of a complete ban, including issuing a joint press release with the secular multiracial women's group, ARROW.[50] The Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM responded to FGM differently with closed-door engagements with the *ulama* and the medical community (see discussion in the next sub-section).

The perception by Islamic women activists that laypersons like SIS activists lack the religious authority to engage in religious interpretations is consistent with recent evidence in Muslim-majority Tunisia, where progressive religious reinterpretations by laypersons to shape receptivity for Islamic law reforms were found to be ineffective in building compromise between secular and religious individuals compared to the reinterpretations proffered by established religious authorities (Grewal and Cebul 2023). Instead, religious reinterpretations by persons not widely recognised in society as holding religious authority tend to produce "emboldened liberals" and "defensive conservatives", attitudes that are not conducive to cooperation and compromise (Grewal and Cebul 2023). In the case of women's activism in Malaysia, this emboldened-defensive dynamic plays out in the tension between SIS and the Islamic women activists over religious authority, which can be discerned in the way they engage with the established religious authority. One side believes in their own moral authority to intervene in social issues while the other side believes that the authority is vested in an established religious institution.

6.3: Engaging Religious Authority

The women activists' manner of engagement with the established religious authorities is shaped by their above-mentioned perceptions of them. As the previous sub-section showed, SIS adopts a more oppositional and emboldened manner of engagement with the established religious authority as they see their role as correcting male biases in institutionalised Islam. They are emboldened because they argue that their advocacy is backed by legitimate (albeit alternative) sources of knowledge. On the other hand, since the Islamic women activists tend to trust in the legitimacy and credibility of the religious authorities, they tend to defer to their

[50] Press Statement: Malaysia Must Protect Girls From Harmful Practices and End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting https://sistersinislam.org/press-statement-malaysia-must-protect-girls-from-harmful-practices-and-end-female-genital-mutilation-cutting/ (last accessed February 6, 2023)

authoritative knowledge, prefer closed-door dialogue over sensitive issues, and rarely adopt oppositional positions openly in the public sphere.

6.3.1: An Optimistic View of Religious Authority

> To me, much of the cries of the women in Malaysia, especially the Muslim women, in terms of the Syariah law, is not because of the…Islamic system itself but because of the implementation – Farah, Wanita IKRAM activist

The Islamic women activists tend to attribute problematic matters involving the Syariah legal system to issues of implementation and the non-uniformity of the Syariah system. They tend to be optimistic about progressive improvements in the system. For example, the Islamic women activists highlight that some of the issues raised by SIS and activists from the secular multiracial groups arose due to complications over jurisdictional conflicts. Jurisdictional conflicts usually occur in divorce situations where a non-Muslim converts to Islam and seeks child custody in the Syariah court where the former non-Muslim spouse has no legal standing (Moustafa 2018). According to Nisa, a Helwa ABIM activist, such issues arose because the Syariah courts could not adjudicate matters involving non-Muslims. For Nisa, the solution would be "to strengthen the *mahkamah* (court) Syariah and make it more flexible." Another Helwa ABIM activist, Nur expressed similar sentiments arguing that Syariah law should be more comprehensive and not limited to personal and family law. By suggesting such solutions, the women implicitly expressed a trust that both non-Muslims and Muslims would receive fair hearing and just outcomes from the religious authorities in the Syariah courts. This level of trust in the Syariah system is not evident with the SIS activists and the Malay women from the secular multiracial groups who adopt a more critical view when highlighting examples of unjust outcomes from Islamic laws that have negatively affected women and non-Muslim minorities.

Since the administration of Islamic affairs is a matter for the individual states in Malaysia, the interpretation of Islamic law is highly contingent on who holds religious authority and in which state. Some states in Malaysia are known to be more rigid in formulating and implementing women-unfriendly Islamic laws that regulate and police Muslim women's personal choices,

with an overall trend toward increased conservatism (Abdullah 2021). Conservatism in this regard being the *ulama's* tendency to "oppose change" and "preserve traditional elements present in a particular socio-political order." (Hamid and Ismail 2014, p. 160). Wanita IKRAM activist Farah acknowledged that Syariah judges from different states can have different approaches to interpreting law from "the conservative one, the orthodox one, and then the liberal one." By this Farah explained that some judges (that she termed orthodox and conservative) are reluctant to deviate from classical interpretations while others (that she termed liberal) are willing to practice *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) and to consult with interpretative work by contemporary *ulama* around the world so that their judgments are more aligned with changing contexts. For Farah, the solution to the problem of non-uniformity is the professionalisation of state-level Syariah judges and standardisation of interpretations through higher training initiatives by the federal religious agencies; she argued these are already avenues currently pursued in Malaysia. Alia from Wanita IKRAM supported such training, arguing that they are effective in getting judges to be "women-friendly" and "to be very kind to the women, to have very good understanding about the rights of women, and not to say derogatory words to the women in court." Alia is also optimistic about the progressive changes in the Syariah system in Selangor state[51] that she lived in. She believes that Selangor had the "best" Islamic law in Malaysia, and it would set an example for the other states.[52]

The Islamic women activists' optimistic perspectives about treatment of women in Syariah courts are not completely groundless. Contrary to the belief that Syariah courts are conservative and biased against women due to the higher prevalence of males in authority positions, the courts can function as sites of "counterhegemonic" discourse on gender (Peletz 2002; Peletz 2018). Peletz's study of Syariah divorce processes showed that women are able to challenge their husbands in front of the judges, and the judges often blame men for their delinquent roles as husbands and fathers (Peletz 2002). Compared to the 1970s, the Syariah courts have evolved over the past decades to become more responsive and flexible in addressing Muslim women's legal claims, with the courts being "more inclined to punish men who violate" Syariah family law (Peletz 2018, p. 680). As a result, according to Peletz, Muslim women tend to receive more

[51] Selangor is the richest and most urbanised state in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2022).
[52] However, Alia's characterisation of "best" Islamic law would not be accepted by a segment of society, who may be affected by the laws. For example, under Selangor Syariah law, it is an offense to commit "sexual intercourse against the order of nature with other men". A recent attempt by the Syariah system to enforce this law was successfully challenged by the Muslim defendant in the federal civil courts, on the basis that the law was unconstitutional (Lim 2021).

justice in the Syariah courts today than they had in the past (Peletz 2018). Syariah judges have also shown more willingness to harshly punish Muslim men than Muslim women under the expanded array of Islamic laws that govern matters of gender and sexuality (Peletz 2018). Even so, the extent to which women embrace the dominant religious and cultural codes of Muslim female obedience and heteronormativity mediated the justice they received in the courts (Peletz 2018).

6.3.2: Discriminatory and Women-Unfriendly Fatwas

The progressive reforms within the Syariah system do not negate the fact that problematic women-unfriendly *fatwas* do get implemented and end up regulating Muslim women's personal choices and reaffirming the unequal gender hierarchies in society. For example, *ulama* have in recent years issued *fatwas* that "banned yoga, urged women to not dress or behave like males, [and] prohibited women from rejecting their husbands' overtures for sex." (Abdullah 2021, p. 510). Sofea from the secular and multiracial group ARROW, citing the story of her friend, lamented that such *fatwas* shape the thinking of even highly educated Muslim women living in urban Malaysia. According to Sofea, her friend who is "super-educated" and worldly (holding a masters' degree from an overseas university) shared that she submitted to sexual relations with her husband even though she was unwilling as she was still recovering from a difficult pregnancy and birthing experience. Sofea expressed anger at her friend for not standing up to the husband, but she also accepted that her friend's belief was "internalised" because "she really thinks she has to say yes, if not, she'll go to hell."

Unlike SIS, the Islamic women activists rarely comment on or counter women-unfriendly *fatwas* in the public sphere when the *fatwas* become publicised (and ridiculed in some instances) in the media. Their silence though tends to foster the perception among some of the other women activists like Sofea that Islamic women activists while "sincere" in their activism ultimately "invest time in people like them only" because they "lack the human rights lens" necessary to recognise the harms from gendered *fatwas*. Najwa from SIS suggested that most Muslims in Malaysia including Islamic women activists are uncomfortable with challenging the authority of the *ulama* (religious scholars) and the *ustaz* (religious teachers) because they are socialised to believe that "*kalau kita percaya dengan Islam…tak bolehlah bersoalkan banyak-banyak* (if we believe in Islam…[we] cannot ask too many questions)".

However, my conversations with the Islamic women activists indicate that they do express awareness of the gendered impact of certain *fatwas* and do pose critical questions among themselves. The key difference that stood out in contrast to the other women activists is that Islamic women activists prioritise dialogue with the established religious authorities because they believe in their credibility and legitimacy. This difference is evident in how the women activists approached two recent social issues – child marriage and *khitan anak perempuan* (female circumcision) – that gained public prominence (mainly though public awareness campaign efforts spearheaded by SIS and secular multiracial groups) during the post-2018 general election period. SIS, ARROW, and several secular multiracial groups publicly advocated for a blanket ban on both practices. On the other hand, Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM activists engaged the *ulama* along with health professionals in the form of closed-door seminars and roundtables to gather multiple perspectives on these issues. Nur from Helwa ABIM described how the women activists shared data they had compiled from their shelter home, Bayt-al-Rahmah (House of Mercy), for pregnant and unwed teenage girls with the *ulama* in Selangor. They sought to impress upon the *ulama* the harms associated with early marriage and motherhood of teenage girls such as divorce, lack of education and higher rates of infant mortality. However, it was only after the Sultan of Selangor issued a public statement in 2018 highlighting that early marriage was not warranted if there would be harms on the child that Nur and her fellow activists made public their stance. They posted information that advocated against early age marriages on their website and on social media.[53] A Selangor *fatwa* later raised the legal age of marriage to 18 for Muslims, with the provision that those who wished to marry earlier had to obtain permission from a Syariah judge who would determine if the request was warranted.[54] Some of the Islamic activists expressed their personal disapproval for marriages under 18 based on their experiences with young people, citing immaturity and losing out on education as primary reasons (both Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM run shelter homes for unwed pregnant teenage girls and their thinking on the matter mirrored concerns articulated by SIS and the secular multiracial groups). However, the Islamic women activists accept that Syariah judges should hold the discretion to judge on a case-by-case basis for those wishing to

[53] Perkahwinan Kanak-Kanak Jelas Mengakibatkan Kemudaratan dan Mesti Dihentikan [Child Marriage Causes Harm and Must be Stopped], Media Statement, Helwa ABIM, 18 July 2018. Available online at: https://www.facebook.com/abimalaysia/posts/pfbid0ayFRRQZAttFAfuazrPqNJN4gK3gSF7cuPnU44Snk7kcTSkQsShfMebGkeUhizuKel (last accessed 10 February 2023).

[54] Although several states expressed their intention to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 under their Syariah law, only Selangor successfully managed to do so while 7 other states explicitly declined to follow suit (Ram 2021).

marry earlier (the current minimum marriageable age in most states is 16 for females and 18 for males).

The issue of *khitan* proved more challenging for the Islamic women activists. The issue gained international prominence in 2018 after delegates at the 69th Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) criticised Malaysia for permitting female genital mutilation (FGM). The Malaysian government defended the practice as a cultural obligation and differentiated *khitan* from FGM by using the phrase female circumcision (Iguchi et al 2023; Ainslie 2015). Female circumcision is widely practiced in Malaysia, with an estimated 90-99% of Malay females having undergone the process primarily because Malays believe the practice is mandatory in Islam (Rashid et al 2020; Ainslie 2015). The common procedure for *khitan* in Malaysia involves nicking the skin of the clitoris of female infants with a small knife, resulting in a drop of blood (Isa et al. 1999). Alia from Wanita IKRAM explained that they tried to understand the issue and find consensus among the *ulama* in a dialogue session, but they encountered difficulty.

The dynamics of contention over *khitan* were already set in place much earlier. In 2009, the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs (JAKIM) issued a *fatwa* that made the practice *wajib* (mandatory) for females, with the provision that it could be avoided if harmful. Prior to this, *khitan* as a religious obligation was based on cultural understanding but the 2009 *fatwa* made it officially an Islamic matter (Ainslie 2015). JAKIM's decision was partly motivated by a desire to assert itself as the definite authority on all matters related to Islam at a time when its authority (that is embedded with the political authority of UMNO) was perceived as being challenged. This perception was due to the electoral challenges of the ruling Malay party UMNO in 2008, and the growing critique of "creeping Islamisation" by secular "institutions (such as the Malaysian Bar Council) [who] became concerned around what they perceived as the erosion of the Malaysian constitution and its corresponding values by Syariah (Islamic) laws." (Ainslie 2015, p. 6). As such, the opposition to the 2009 *fatwa* within Malaysia became "a manifestation of internal frustrations" with the state and "an attempt by liberal forces to use globally dominant constructions" of FGM to oppose Islamisation (Ainslie 2015, p. 2). However, the internal opposition and the international community's zero-tolerance stance shut down dialogue over the state's intention to set medical guidelines, which would have medicalised a process that was previously unregulated and therefore potentially dangerous (Ainslie 2015).

As such, when the matter resurfaced again in 2018, Wanita IKRAM decided the matter was better addressed by health professionals in dialogue with the *ulama*. They took no public stance on the matter, even though SIS requested for them to clarify their positioning. For Alia, the matter is not "within their authority" to decide. She rationalised their stance on the basis that the issue is non-urgent since *khitan* in Malaysia is not an invasive or dangerous procedure like it was in some parts of Africa and the Middle East. Helwa ABIM later took a similar stance arguing that it was the parents' right to decide on religious grounds if they wanted their daughters circumcised (Lau 2023). As these two recent examples indicate, the Islamic women activists navigate a context fraught with contestations over power by choosing to avoid public confrontations with the established religious authority.

6.3.3: "Soft" Malay Culture

> It has to be non-provocative because it's a Malay thing…to avoid any provocative manner. I mean, look at our weapon, it's *keris* (dagger) compared with guns or bombs, that type of culture, the epistemology, and our history. It's very soft, but at the same time it doesn't mean that we don't fight at all, but it needs to be in our own way – Nur, Helwa ABIM

The perception that taking oppositional public stances to religious authority is provocative and against Malay culture is common among the Islamic women activists. As Nur put it, the Islamic women activists' manner of engagement with religious authority is aligned with "soft" Malay culture. Nur understood that groups like SIS and secular multiracial women's groups wanted Helwa ABIM to be more vocal on their stance over issues such as child marriage and *khitan*. However, Nur reasoned that "in a very polarised political menace like Malaysia," there is a need to be strategic by not giving reasons for other (more religiously conservative) groups in society to "shoot at them." To Nur, opposing religious authority in overtly public stances, in the same way other women's groups like SIS do, would be perceived negatively in society because it goes against Malay culture. In Nur's estimation, being non-provocative do not mean they capitulate on issues that matter to them without a fight.

Yet Nur's reasoning reflected the Malay unity narrative previously established by the Malay nationalist political party, UMNO. As Chapter Two highlighted, UMNO cultivated the idea of Malay unity as a central value in Malay culture, but unity was also responsible for promoting power disparities. UMNO instrumentalised Malay unity to condemn competing political ideas in the public sphere as divisive and damaging to Malay interests. In this way, UMNO consolidated its power and established closed-door negotiations as the favoured approach to settle political contention. Closed-door negotiations made it harder for groups to leverage on public pressure to push for change, and it enabled UMNO to keep intra-Malay political competition in check for some decades. In a similar way, Nur's reasoning has the effect of limiting the democratisation of ideas about authority, gender, and religion in Malaysia. Given the women's perceptions about "strengthening" and "empowering" the Syariah system, limiting competing ideas is arguably not an unwanted outcome for Islamic revivalist groups. However, their ability to function as independent pressure groups for reforms would clearly be constrained.

6.4: Gender Roles

The tension between women activists over religious authority is an overarching one that connects with other tensions over differences in religious interpretations. The following sub-section analyses the tension over the women's different conceptions of gender roles, which the women use to articulate the boundaries of their group difference. The Muslim women activists disagree on the continued relevance of classical theological interpretations of *qiwāmah* and *wilāyah* in Malaysia. *Qiwāmah* is understood as the right and duty of the husband to hold authority over his wife in the household while *wilāyah* is understood as the right and duty of male family members to exercise guardianship over female members (Mir-Hosseini et al 2015).[55] The Malay women from SIS and the secular multiracial groups emphasise that the theological concepts entrench gender hierarchies that detract from the ethos of gender equality inherent within Islam. Conversely, the Islamic women activists emphasise that the theological concepts are aligned with gender complementarity that are highly relevant to the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between men and women in marriage and in the family.

[55] Both concepts stem from classical Islamic interpretations of verse 4.34 in the Quran (see pg. 26 of this thesis).

6.4.1: Gender Equality

The women activists from SIS argue that the traditional concepts were interpreted through a patriarchal lens by male religious elites in historical, social, and political contexts that are no longer relevant in contemporary contexts like Malaysia. They argue that women today are placed at a disadvantage when traditional concepts maintain the gender hierarchy where men hold power over women by limiting women's choice-making abilities in important matters such as marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance, and spousal maintenance in cases of divorce, and by influencing women to internalise patriarchal beliefs.

6.4.1.1: Male Biases and the Gender Hierarchy

As previously discussed, the SIS activists justify their advocacy of alternative views of Islam by emphasising that *fiqh* is the human understanding and interpretation of the Islamic divine principles, and hence could be subject to human error. Not only could human understanding be flawed, but the SIS activists also stress that universalising Islamic knowledge when it is derived through male dominance is problematic. Religious authority is exercised through the interpretation of Islamic doctrine, namely with the issuance of a *fatwa* by a *mufti* (chief Islamic scholar) or serving as a judge in the Syariah courts (Künkler and Nisa 2017). SIS has long advocated for more female judges in the Syariah courts, partly contributing to the National Fatwa Committee's ruling in 2006 to permit women to serve as Syariah judges (Steiner 2021). Since then, most women served in supportive roles as mediators and research officers in the Syariah courts until Selangor's Syariah courts appointed several women to its lower courts in 2016. Women are not appointed as *mufti* in any of the Malaysian states.

> It's still the men's way of thinking or male *ulama* way of perceiving things. They tried to put in their own [male] perspective in interpreting the incidents or whatever stories that [were] presented. So, I was like, this is problematic – Umairah, SIS activist

Umairah, who described herself as a former "Islamist" from a religiously conservative background with an undergraduate degree in Islamic Studies, explained that she developed this understanding of *fiqh* on her own even before she joined SIS as an activist. During a discussion at university, Umairah's close male friend, whom she regarded as highly intelligent and

learned, chose to interpret a specific *hadith* (Prophet's sayings) on the prohibition of forced marriages of daughters by parents and guardians as merely "advisory" rather than a ruling; the implication of the male friend's interpretation being that the *hadith* could be disregarded by parents where necessary, without them incurring a sin. Such an interpretation reinforces the concept of *wilāyah* wherein the parents (namely the father as the head of the household) had the right to determine significant life choices of their daughter including the choice of a marital partner. The interpretation shocked Umairah because she read the *hadith* as "explicit" [i.e., unambiguous] in its meaning against forced marriages. For Umairah, this was a defining moment where she "learn[ed] to separate between the text and also the people who interpret it", which made clear to her the importance of advocating for gender equality.

6.4.1.2: Women's Lived Experiences

> You work, you give food, you provide the house to the family. Isn't that [the] role of the leader? Where's your husband? They said, oh, my husband ran away – Aina, SIS activist

The traditional concepts *wilāyah* and *qiwāmah* play a significant role in shaping the way Malaysian society perceives Muslim women's roles and responsibilities as primarily mothers and wives who should prioritise caregiving of their family over other activities (Hanami 1994). The men's roles and responsibilities are primarily as fathers and husbands who should lead as the head of their household and prioritise the financial provision and protection of their household (Hanami 1994). SIS activists seek to unsettle this conception of traditional gender roles by connecting the alternative views of Islam from Islamic feminist scholarship to women's lived experiences. While Muslim men are legally required to support their female family members under Islamic law in Malaysia underpinned by these traditional concepts, SIS activists argue that the lived experiences of women in Malaysia reveal a different reality – there are issues of husbands abandoning their wives and children; refusing to pay spousal maintenance which Syariah courts require but do not enforce; husbands secretly entering into polygamous marriages in neighbouring countries like Thailand and then paying a fine and legalising them in Malaysia; and divorced Muslim women effectively being the heads of their own households and earning their own incomes to support themselves and their children.

SIS highlighted that the classical theological interpretation of men's God-given dominance and authority over women in the household also extends to the public sphere in relation to women in leadership positions. For instance, Aina noted that some people in Malaysia believe that women cannot be "leaders" due to a *hadith* that attributes the following quote to the Prophet Muhammad: "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler" (Al-Bukhari n.d.).[56] When a single mother articulated this belief at a SIS seminar, Aina countered it by pointing out that the single mother was already a leader in her own household because she (and not a male family member) was the primary provider in her own household. SIS activist Najwa concurred arguing that "more women are now the providers and protectors of their families" and yet the Syariah legal framework is still heavily based on men being the providers and protectors of women. By showing the disconnect between male-biased interpretations and the lived realities of women in their advocacy, Qistina argued that SIS pushes for Syariah law reform that "fits into the realities of society and produces justice…[congruent] with the values espoused in the Quran."

6.4.1.3: Internalised Patriarchy

> On gender equality…[they think] it's okay not to have women in the parliament, it's okay if women don't become CEOs. These are literally women themselves, who have been internalised with patriarchy, who think this way – Sofea, ARROW

SIS and the Muslim women activists from the secular multiracial groups explained that the social pressure to be better Muslims resulted in some women internalising patriarchal attitudes that reinforce gender inequalities. For instance, Sofea's group, ARROW, encountered disinterested attitudes from some women civil servants when they conducted a gender mainstreaming workshop for one of the governmental ministries. Muslim women are increasingly highly educated, and in the urban areas of Malaysia, they make their mark in professional careers like medicine and science, law and in academia (Kloos 2019). Yet both Alya from Kryss Network and Sofea lament that some educated women in the urban areas of

[56] Bøe notes that this *hadith* is "considered *sahih* (authentic), and the statement has been seen as a general ban against women's leadership" in Muslim societies (Bøe 2020).

Selangor abandon their careers to be stay-at-home mothers and wives because they believe they should prioritise their families. The World Bank noted that in 2018, 80.4% of working-age men were in the labour market in Malaysia compared to women at only 55.2% (considered one of the lower rates compared to other Southeast Asian countries); the commonly cited constraint by women for not working was the burden of housework (Schmillen et al 2019).

Even though, the Malaysian state embarked on a modernisation project that expanded educational and employment opportunities for women, the state was also instrumental in reinforcing traditional gender roles through its political discourse on Islamic family values (Stivens 2006). Patriarchal attitudes are also evident within the minority Chinese and Indian communities and similarly limit the participation of non-Malay women in male-dominated areas such as in politics and in the corporate world (Mustafa 2016). Yet the theological interpretations by religious authority figures coupled with political discourse on Islamic family values carry an additional weight for Malay women wanting to abide by their religious duties. In a context where the belief that household duties are a woman's responsibility is cultivated by religious, political, and cultural claims, women who are overburdened by juggling the demands from career and family could indeed choose to leave the labour market as Alya and Sofea argue do occur.[57]

> I got into an argument with my *ustazah* (female religious teacher) because she told me that men are allowed to marry four [wives] without the consent…of the first wife. And she said it [Syariah requirement to get permission from the first wife] was something added by our own country when in actual Islam, you don't need the consent…I said that's…like…cheating, you know. And she's saying no, no, no, it's the men's right to do what they want…as long as you [the men] can afford it – Alya, Kryss Network

Theological interpretations are also used by religious teachers in the Malay community to define "good Muslim women" as those who are submissive, selfless, and obedient, in effect

[57] Class differences also entrench gender inequalities as some women may not even have the privilege of choice. Malaysian women participate in the informal economy through part-time labour activities such as food catering, childcare services and in agriculture. Some women in the informal economy are forced to juggle household and job responsibilities while receiving less compensation and labour protections compared to men in the formal economy (Thambiah and Tan 2019).

teaching women that they are subordinate to men (Ismail 2004). SIS activist Najwa highlighted that under new Syariah legislations, men who marry illegally without the consent of the first wife can legalise their new marriage by simply paying a fine. For SIS and the women from the secular multiracial groups, such additions to the Syariah law, coupled with women-unfriendly religious teachings in the Muslim community such as those described by Alya, reinforce gender inequalities. By insisting on the principle of gender equality as the basis for religious reinterpretations, the women from SIS and the secular multiracial groups challenge the conceptions of traditional gender roles that are upheld by religious authority, the Malaysian state, and cultural norms.

6.4.2: Gender Complementarity

The Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM acknowledge that the lived experiences of some Muslim women in Malaysia are far from the ideal vision of a just and fair Muslim society that they advocate for. They attribute such negative outcomes to a lack of religious literacy in society. They emphasise that the traditional concepts of *wilāyah* and *qiwāmah* are still relevant to understand the ideal model of marriage as conceived in Islamic thought. Their understanding of an ideal model of marriage is rooted in gender complementarity, i.e., the idea that differences of biology and sex necessitate differentiated gender roles but this "does not denigrate women to a lesser or inferior position in marriage." (Karim 2021, p. 112).

6.4.2.1: Rationalising Differentiated Gender Roles

> If we have children of different ages – one, two, and three – and we want to give them presents and want to be fair about it, we recognise that not everyone should have the same thing…Maybe the toy that the three-year-old wants and loves to play with is not appropriate for the one-year-old. So, I think *adil* (fairness and justice) is different there…In terms of gender, as well…Males and females are created differently, then *adil* should also be different. And because of that we [women] should have more rights in terms of security…Sometimes not everything that is fought for female rights in Western countries is

> appropriate for females in Muslim countries – Nabilah, Wanita IKRAM

Nabilah used the concept of *adil* to rationalise differentiated gender roles and responsibilities for women and men within a Muslim marriage. She, along with some of the other Islamic women activists, used arguments that referred to the "biological nature" of men and women to highlight the view that each sex has different natural inclinations that are suited for their responsibilities within a marriage. For example, Farah from Wanita IKRAM suggested that women are naturally more nurturing and patient than men so they would fare better in caregiving roles. Their argument appear to be aligned with biological determinism and essentialist theories about male-female differences, which is critiqued in feminist theory as rooted in sexist stereotypes that reinforce gender hierarchies (Greene 2021). However, Alia from Wanita IKRAM stressed that the acceptance of differentiated gender roles did not equate to an acceptance of the subordination of women to men. Rather, she suggested that "men and women are equal in terms of their rights and their needs" in Islamic teachings, even if they hold different responsibilities and perform different roles within the marriage and the family unit. Nur from Helwa ABIM described this as the "equity and equilibrium" approach of relations between men and women.

For Nabilah, the differentiated roles in Islam meant that men had more of a "burden" than women since they are required in Islam to provide financially for their families. For instance, the husbands are required to pay their wives *nafkah* (financial support). The women may choose to work and provide for their families out of love, but they were not obligated to do so. The money that women inherit and / or earn was theirs to keep and spend as they wished. As such, Nabilah argue that women are protected in their rights within a marriage. She acknowledged that some males may misinterpret gender roles to justify the prevention of females from studying and working on the basis that once women are married, they will "be in the kitchen, cooking and all" as part of their caregiving roles. However, Nabilah said religious literacy would correct such misguided attitudes. For the Islamic women activists, improving religious literacy for men entailed educating them to step up to their responsibilities as *qawwam* (protectors and maintainer, i.e., leader) of their families.

6.4.2.2: Male Democratic Leader in the Family

> Leaders' [job] is to guide…But in leadership, we have many kinds of leadership, right? Like the autocrat and democrat and so on…In Islam, we always say about the *shura* (consultation). *Shura* means we discuss it together and make a decision…but still we need a leader…It's a structural thing, we still need a leader to guide us, to show us the way in the decision because we have the word *qawwam* (protectors and maintainers, i.e., leader), right? The man is the leader. So, what kind of leader? How to be a leader? – Nisa, Helwa ABIM

Since the idea of male as the leader of the family is derived from specific text in the Quran, the Islamic women activists accept it, but they interpret it in a way that did not undermine women's voices in the household. Nisa provided an analogy of a democratic leader to explain her understanding of *qawwam* – the democratic leader of a country guides the country toward a positive outcome, but the leader would not make decisions without input from his ministers and civil servants. Similarly, the male head of the family guides the household to harmonious and happy outcomes, but he cannot do it alone without input from the other members of the family including the wife. Nisa likened the sharing of input within the family to the practice of Islamic *shura* (consultation) in early Islamic political history where decisions were made collectively in discussion with key representatives of groups in a society. As such, Nisa was arguing that even though the male is the leader of the family, he cannot make decisions in a just and fair fashion without consultation with his wife as she is equally an important member of the household. Nisa suggested that *shura* between husband and wife ensure that the relationship between "men and women are balanced" and they can "empower each other."

The large number of working women constitute a social reality in contemporary Malaysia. Unsurprisingly then, Farah from Wanita IKRAM highlighted that it is unfair for women to work and contribute to the household finances and yet be expected to undertake the household responsibilities on her own. For Farah, there should be "an equal understanding" on shared responsibilities of the household forged through discussion between the couple. Her argument sought to equalise the hierarchical relations inherent in the notion of *qawwam*. Nur from Helwa ABIM also argued that the theological concepts could not justify the prevention women from seeking leadership positions in their careers. Citing the examples of her male family members,

she argued that good Muslim men would not attempt to limit a woman's potential to serve her family and community through beneficial work. Therefore, while the Islamic women activists accept the idea of differentiated gender roles, they argue for equality between men and women in practical terms through dialogue with male family members.

6.4.2.3: Syariah Protections for Women

The Islamic women activists reject the notion of gender equality on the grounds that *wali* (male guardianship) in marriage and child custody issues, and unequal inheritance rules in Syariah law conferred legal protections for women. Nabilah from Wanita IKRAM expressed her frustration at groups like SIS who pushed for gender equality. She suggested that their actions are indicative that gender equality proponents poorly understood the Islamic *hikmah* (rationale) for certain gender-based legal inequalities.

In relation to unequal inheritance rules, Sarah from Helwa ABIM argue that the push for "equality is just a short-term solution" as equality could result in unfavourable outcomes for women. Sarah cited two examples when unfavourable outcomes could occur: (1) equality in inheritance settlements may disadvantage some women, who would have stood to inherit more than men under certain Syariah legal provisions (2) a woman may inherit equally but then run out of money to sustain herself. Sarah argued that *wilāyah* and *qiwāmah* placed a legal burden on men to take care of their female family members; women could seek recourse in the courts in the case when male guardians failed to assume their responsibilities. If a woman had no male guardians to care for her, then the state (and the citizens) must assume that responsibility. In her estimation, pushing for gender equality removes such protections for women in need. By this, Sarah was referring to financial assistance that is administered by the state Islamic bodies responsible for *zakat* (charity) to the *asnaf* group in society (those eligible to receive *zakat*). Still, a woman without a *wali* is not the only qualifier for financial assistance under the current *zakat* framework, so Sarah's arguments were aspirational.

> If one lady has an abusive father, or maybe her father has died, and she has an uncle that doesn't like her and can bring harm to her in terms of the decision he makes, then that is something that should be brought to [Syariah] court because that's a special case…We cannot

> just say, no, he is still your guardian. No. It should be looked into on a case-by-case basis. *Wali* (male guardianship) is not a blanket rule for all – Nabilah, Wanita IKRAM

In relation to *wali*, Nabilah acknowledged that not all male guardians would treat their female charges in a rightful manner – in matters of marriage, a Muslim woman (even adult women) must obtain permission from her *wali*, and it is possible that a *wali* may not base his decision on the interest of the woman; an abused child may also be subject to harmful actions by the *wali*. However, Nabilah argue that such examples are exceptional cases for which legal recourse could be sought in the Syariah courts. Exceptional cases do not render the higher purposes of *wali* irrelevant in Islam. She cited the Islamic principle of *rukhsah* (leniency or concession from a general rule) to argue that Syariah courts have the legal tools to be responsive to such problems. To protect a woman or child, the Syariah judge could remove the guardianship rule under the principle of *rukhsah*.

The Islamic women activists' line of reasoning is based on an aspirational vision of a Malaysian state rooted in Islamic principles that the Islamic revivalist groups advocate for. The problems of enforcement of Syariah court orders though often result in non-compliance (Saad 2013), which do not necessarily improve the situation of women. Yet their arguments are consistent with the optimistic outlook and trustful attitudes held by Islamic women activists that Syariah processes are progressively being improved upon.

6.5: In-Group Belonging and Trust

Because the Islamic women activists believe in the credibility and legitimacy of the religious authorities and value the Syariah institution, they are willing to trust that through dialogue and information sharing with the established religious authority, wrongs will (eventually) be righted. In this way, there are bonds of particularised trust between the Islamic women activists and the established religious authority (Uslaner 2002). The theoretical argument on "particularised trusters" as people with a strong sense of group identity, who tend to trust and cooperate more within their own in-group than with outsiders (Uslaner 2002), would explain why the Islamic women activists tend to avoid overt confrontations with the established religious authority. Those individuals who self-identify with a group develop shared beliefs

and views of the world, i.e., the social knowledge that is transmitted and maintained through social interactions cultivates the sense of belonging to an in-group (Mannheim 1952; Turner et al 1987). The Islamic revivalist groups and the figures in the Syariah system who constitute the religious authority can be considered an in-group as they share and value the same ideological beliefs over the Syariah system's role in positioning Islam's centrality in Malaysian society and politics. Similarly, SIS and the secular multiracial groups in Malaysia can be considered as an in-group due to their shared belief in the value of human rights based on internationally accepted secular conventions. So even though SIS engages with religious interpretations, they can be viewed as an out-group by the Islamic revivalist groups.

Trust entails risk-taking, that is a readiness to take risk in relation to engaging with the other, while distrust entails a refusal to take risks (Bar-Tal and Alon 2016). As particularised trusters, the Islamic women activists can "worry that people outside their own group may not share their values and may even have views at odds with their own," (Uslaner and Conley 2003, p. 335), making it risky for the women to take public stands on certain issues as it could break ranks within their in-group and de-legitimise the established religious authority. Furthermore, there are other actors within the in-group besides the religious authority that the women engage with such as the male leadership of the larger organisations they are part of (Islamic women's groups are wings within these larger organisations). Particularised trust also explains the close relationship between SIS and the secular multiracial groups since they have shared concerns on how Syariah law impedes on human rights, which is evidenced in their joint advocacy over the recent social issues of child marriage and *khitan*.

A 2014 statement by the head of Wanita IKRAM that was issued just one month after SIS was labelled as deviant in the Selangor *fatwa* is revealing of how the Islamic revivalist groups chart out "religious boundaries." Religious boundaries are in turn shaped by interpretations of Islamic doctrine set by the Islamic officers vested with religious authority.

> As an NGO, Wanita IKRAM makes Syariah a solution to the problems of the community. We want our society to have a fair sharing of space and opportunities, development benefits and resources between women and men. Islam has presented balance and *wasatiyah* (middle path) that can be highlighted as a prosperous solution. But now, without realising it, a group of radical feminists

> (supporters of feminism) has been formed, some of whose struggles violate religious boundaries and increasingly attract the attention of the younger generation. Wanita IKRAM not only fights for women's issues but also includes efforts in youth development, economy, politics, education, women's leadership, Syariah law and *dakwah* [preaching]. We believe that in fighting for these issues, we will not move alone, rather we would like to establish relationships and build alliances with other women's organisations, both domestically and abroad – Che Asmah, Wanita IKRAM[58]

As such, even though the Islamic women activists, SIS and other Malay activists in this thesis are co-religionists, their different beliefs over religious authority promotes in-group and out-group dynamics that hinder the building of relations of trust necessary for compromises and cooperative action. From the standpoint of the Islamic women activists, it would be riskier for Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM to engage openly with women activists who hold alternative views of Islam because doing so may legitimise those views and potentially subvert or weaken the Syariah system, which is built on the legitimacy of the religious authority. Conversely, it would be less risky for Islamic activists to engage with non-Muslims since Islam is often not the focus of such interactions; and even if the engagement veered to Islam, it would be easier to dis-engage with the argument that non-Muslims do not possess the credibility and legitimacy to speak on Islamic law and affairs. Indeed, the Islamic women activists in my conversations emphasise their efforts at engaging with non-Muslims through inter-faith and inter-racial activities to promote themselves as "*ummatan wasatan*" (middle way / moderate Muslim community) who are open to dialogue and cooperation with non-Malay minority groups; their engagement with the non-Muslim groups is in line with Che Asmah's stance on building alliances.

6.6: Conclusion

This chapter argues that the tension over religious authority is a barrier to building trust between ideologically different Muslim women's groups because their advocacy is ultimately underpinned by different imperatives – one side seeks to maintain the legitimacy and credibility

[58] This is my translation of the statement in Malay (Che Asmah cited in Hanafi et al 2016, p. 26).

of the established religious authority while the other side seeks to check, apply pressure for reforms, and hold authority to public account instead. This tension is an overarching one that shapes tensions over issues that intersect gender and religious interpretation. For example, perceptions on gender roles were instrumental for the women to articulate their respective group boundaries. These tensions are mediated in a context where the maintenance of power hierarchies through the legitimacy of religious authority is highly relevant and meaningful to those who wish to maintain Malay political and religious hegemony. In an unstable political context like Malaysia where race and religion are frequently instrumentalised by politicians for political gains and ethno-religious contentions are sensationalised by the media, threat perceptions can be triggered causing the women activists to believe their values and worldviews are under attack. Threat perceptions inevitably promote distrust so that "every gesture, statement, action can be interpreted as insincere and exploitative" by the women (Govier and Verwoerd 2002, p. 185). Similar threat perceptions have kept secular feminist and Islamic women's groups apart in other Muslim-majority contexts (see Salime 2011; Debuysere 2016). Chapter Five emphasised that the sectarianisation of the 'liberal' Muslim other is a politically motivated construction of Muslim group difference that currently feeds into threat perceptions and polarising culture wars, and not one based on innate group difference. Since sectarianisation is a political construction and not an inevitable outcome, there is the possibility that unity between women's groups could be achieved instead. As the next chapter shows, contrary to expectations, the Malay women activists in Malaysia are able to set aside their prejudiced beliefs to engage with and learn from each other despite having knowledge of their ideological differences and past experiences of being on oppositional sides.

Chapter Seven

Engaging the Other and Social Learning

" Just because you don't brand it as feminism that doesn't mean it isn't feminism." – Hani, Dear Her

7.1: Introduction

This empirical chapter analyses the women activists' perspectives to understand why they choose to engage with other Malay women's groups that are ideologically different from their own group and the resultant social learning effects of recent inter-group interactions. The previous chapter had argued that the tensions over religious authority tend to act as a barrier to trust between the ideologically different Malay women's groups because their advocacy is underpinned by different imperatives – the Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM seek to maintain the legitimacy and credibility of the established religious authority while the women activists from SIS (and supported by likeminded secular multiracial women's groups) seek to apply pressure for reforms and hold religious authority to public account. This tension over religious authority, coupled with the polarised political context, promotes conditions of distrust, which can cause women's groups to take on oppositional stances and to simply avoid interactions with each other because it is less risky to do so. Indeed, during the height of the public contention over the religious freedom court cases in the mid-2000s, the women's groups took on oppositional stances, with different groups defending competing conceptions of individual rights and culturally specific rights based on secular civil law and religious law respectively.

The divisive forces of intra-Muslim political differences that drive the sectarianisation of the "liberal" Muslim other (Chapter Five) magnify the ideological differences of Muslim civil society groups. In such a polarised political context, we would expect that the women activists would be less likely to engage with Muslim groups that are known to hold different positions from their own. However, in my conversations with the women activists, they narrated accounts of recent inter-group interactions and they expressed the importance of engaging with other Muslim women's groups. They saw value in inter-group interactions even though they were well aware that the other Muslim women activists held different ideological viewpoints from themselves, with some of those viewpoints being perceived as morally objectionable from

the different women's respective ideological standpoints. Yet the women were able to set aside their moral objections to engage in inter-group interactions, with some of the Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM pinpointing 2016 as a turning point for their group.

The chapter explains this unexpected and surprising finding – why did the women activists choose to engage with each other despite having knowledge of their ideological differences and past experiences of being on oppositional sides? Using the decolonial feminist standpoint lens to analyse the women's perspectives on inter-group engagements, the chapter argues that the women's *experiences* in the course of their advocacy work made them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. Hence, their own experiences helped to establish a modicum of trust in the expected good will of women activists from other groups, which was sufficient enough for them to engage with each other. The chapter then analyses the opportunities for social learning between the women activists that were facilitated by recent inter-group interactions.[59] The chapter concludes with the argument that social learning through inter-group interactions can be helpful to foster the kinds of trustful relations between the women activists which would be necessary in the longer term for compromise and cooperation on difficult social issues that intersect gender and Islamic law.

7.2: Why Engage the Other?

Through the decolonial feminist standpoint lens, this section analyses the women's experiences in the course of their advocacy work that the chapter argues made them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. The three themes from the women's narrations of their experiences that are analysed in this section are: (1) navigating diversity (2) being Muslim and feminist (3) reducing teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

7.2.1: Navigating Diversity

The primary objective of ABIM and IKRAM as *dakwah* (proselytization) religious groups is to educate Muslims to be more knowledgeable of their own religion and to provide grassroots

[59] The concept of social learning is elaborated later in the chapter. In brief, this type of learning is situated within wider social units or communities of practice and the learning occurs through social interactions between actors in a social network.

support to the Muslim community (e.g., through educational programmes, running schools, shelter homes, and providing charity). However, the Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM highlight that one other important aspect of their advocacy work involved engagement with non-Muslim and non-Malay groups. They see their role in inter-racial and inter-religious activities as pertinent in propagating the "right" values of Islam, with inclusivity rather than exclusivity being an overarching value.

> We are all the same, equal in the eyes of God. Men and women, and no one is better than the other, so that is the kind of the principles that we want to share with the community…This is the Islamic principles that all Muslim organisations uphold…We always try to see the practical way of depicting Islam, carrying it out in terms of the practices. So, in that way we engage in all communities, all groups…It could be faith-based or even groups [that are] ethnic-based – Alia, Wanita IKRAM

Alia from Wanita IKRAM noted that their motivation for engaging with non-Malays was that Malaysia has a problem with racial integration due to toxic identity politics. According to Alia, some Malay groups "become racists" when they turn exclusivist by promoting the view that only Malays had "certain rights". By this, Alia is referring to the pro-Malay affirmative action policies that have become conflated with the notion of Malay special rights, and which are at the heart of the political polarisation in Malaysia. For Alia, such exclusivist racial attitudes are un-Islamic because they tend to cause disunity within the country. Putri from Helwa ABIM echoed such sentiments and stressed that racial and religious diversity are a reality in Malaysia that Islamic groups needed to work with and not against.

The Islamic women activists' openness to engagement with non-Muslim and non-Malay groups is in line with ABIM and IKRAM's goals on building an Islamic democracy in Malaysia based on the universal aspects of *maqasid-shariah* (higher objectives of Islamic principles) (Malik 2017). As Alia noted, IKRAM's "middle thinking" approach of building bridges helped Muslims and non-Muslims recognise that they share similar thinking on many social and political issues. Alia argued that when non-Muslims in Malaysia understand the *maqasid-shariah*, they recognise that Islamic principles are actually aligned with their own values, which facilitate agreement on common objectives and values. Their efforts appeared to be

paying off in recent years, with some within the Chinese community arguing that non-Malays should engage more with mainstream grassroots organisations such as ABIM and IKRAM who preach inclusivity and who are more representative of the wider Malay community than the "liberal and progressive Malays" who forward bold but polarising positions (see Tan 2019b). The Islamic groups' message of inclusivity was partly inspired by the political thought of Tunisian Muslim thinker Rachid Ghannouchi (Malik 2017). Ghannouchi was instrumental in developing philosophical arguments for an inclusive Islamic democracy – that is, arguments supporting democratic governance in Muslim majority countries, which ABIM and IKRAM incorporated in their respective organisational positions (Malik 2017). Furthermore, in the post-Reformasi period (1998 onwards), the Islamic revivalist groups cooperated with secular and multiracial civil society groups on topics related to good governance, including participating in the Bersih (Clean) anti-corruption rallies alongside the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition at the height of the 1-MDB scandal in 2016 (Hew and Malik 2016). Therefore, over time, both ABIM and IKRAM underwent an organisational evolution where Islamic activists from both groups cultivated the value of consensus-building through dialogue with non-Muslims as the basis to advocate for societal reforms (Malik 2017).

> Our Muslim activist friends put this connotation that "oh, ABIM now is on the LGBT side" just because…[our president used] the rainbow umbrella during the speech – Aisyah, Helwa ABIM

However, the engagement with non-Muslims opens ABIM and IKRAM activists to criticism from other Malay and Muslim groups. Aisyah recounted an experience where the ABIM (male) president gave a speech in a public square during a rainy day using an umbrella with the rainbow colours. Thereafter, photos of the president were posted online by Muslim activists to depict ABIM as a 'liberal' organisation that supported the LGBT[60] community because its president had used an umbrella with the rainbow colours that is internationally recognised as a symbol of the gay community. Alia from Wanita IKRAM also recounted similar incidents where their activists were labelled 'liberal' by other Muslim activists after engaging with non-Muslims – on one occasion, pictures of an inter-faith activity attended by IKRAM activists in

[60] LGBT is commonly used in Malaysia as an umbrella term to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual groups.

a converted church[61] were propagated by Muslims activists from other groups as evidence of IKRAM's purported liberalism.[62] Both women described feelings of sadness over such occurrences because their groups' positive intentions and actions were misunderstood by other Muslims from their own Islamic community. The Islamic women activists from both groups then experienced the pains of being labelled in a pejorative way because their ideological positioning differed from other Muslim activists within the larger Islamic community.

> I always say this to my fellow colleagues…If we can learn to live with Indian and Chinese and Christian and everything, I mean, there's also Muslims who have very different [ways to think] … Like in how they think. And I mean, at the end of the day, we need to have the ability to accept every point of values – Nur, Helwa ABIM

Having to navigate criticism within the larger Islamic activism community made some of the Islamic women activists reflective about dealing with the differences between Muslim women's groups. For example, Nur from Helwa ABIM noted if they could "learn to live" with non-Muslims and non-Malays, they should be able to do likewise with Muslims who think differently (she was referring here to SIS). For Nur, locating and accepting shared values from the different groups – be it non-Muslim or Muslim – is important for the betterment of society. Aisyah from Helwa ABIM also echoed similar sentiments: "if for non-Muslim, also we can do dialogues, if for non-Muslim, also we can do collaboration work…we can do this with a Muslim group, although they have different ideologies." While the Islamic women activists recognise that finding common ground in some areas will be difficult because of certain non-negotiable areas related to religious doctrine (the commonly cited example they offered is the religious understanding that sexual relations and marriage between same sex partners are sinful and thus prohibited acts), they nevertheless express the belief that inter-group engagement is a necessary first step in reaching consensus on areas of conflict. As Nabilah from Wanita IKRAM noted her group should be "willing to listen to their opinions" even if the different groups cannot always come to an agreement.

[61] Alia made a point to note that the meeting location was actually a community centre that used to function as a church, indicating that she was aware of the sensitivities involved in participating in activities held in non-Muslim religious venues. Under Sections 5 and 6 of the Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Among Muslims) Enactment of the Selangor Syariah law, activities involving Muslims in non-Muslim houses of worship are prohibited (Enactment No.1 of 1988, Selangor Syariah Law).
[62] Alia declined to specify which groups.

> As long as people join this civil society, and then discuss and do action that may bring benefit to the society, it's okay. Actually, it's complementing each other. There are some things that the liberal does, I don't have the expertise to do that. But *they* have… As long as we're able to attract more people to join the civil society and contribute to the nation, I think it's okay – Sarah, Helwa ABIM

Notably, some of the Islamic women activists came to an understanding that no single group could hope to address all social problems by itself. This perspective is shaped by their experiences of navigating new (and sometimes uncomfortable) territory in a changing social and political context. For example, Aisyah recounted that a transgender group approached Helwa ABIM in 2018.[63] Months after the UMNO-led government's dramatic loss in the 2018 general elections, several incidents involving the LGBT community were instrumentalised by some Malay opposition politicians and religious groups to delegitimise the new PH government as 'liberal' (Saleem 2020). In this heated climate, two Muslim women in the Islamist-held opposition state of Terengganu were publicly caned under Syariah law for having lesbian sex in a car, a gay nightclub was raided by religious police in the country's capital of Kuala Lumpur, and a transgender woman was brutally beaten by vigilantes; the PH government's muted responses to the anti-LGBT actions dampened the optimism of some of its supporters who hoped for a "more inclusive and moderate" Malaysia where LGBT rights were concerned (Tan 2019c, p. 199). In light of these developments, Aisyah surmised that the transgender group wanted to understand Helwa ABIM's position on the LGBT community.[64] Aisyah noted that one of the representatives of the group was a Muslim transgender woman. To the group, Aisyah expressed her belief that the sexual act between same sex partners was a sin in Islam but maintained that the LGBT community had the same rights to live safely as anyone else in Malaysia. Aisyah's positioning mirrored statements by then-deputy prime minister of the PH government, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who asserted that since Islam was the "official religion" in Malaysia, public attempts to "glamorise" the LGBT lifestyle were prohibited, but that "LGBTs have the right to practise whatever [it is] they do in private" (Kamal 2018). The PH government's position was akin to the Clinton administration's much criticised "don't ask

[63] Aisyah did not identify the group.
[64] The transgender group could have approached ABIM because it retains close links with PH. The leader of PH, Anwar Ibrahim, was a founding member of ABIM before he entered politics. Several of the Helwa ABIM activists in this research had worked in a professional capacity with Anwar's PKR, a component political party with PH.

don't tell" policy for homosexuals working in the US military during the 1990s (Tan 2019c). In the Malaysian context, the PH government's position presented a significant break from the previous government because PH acknowledged the LGBT community's right to exist so long their gender and sexual identities were not flaunted in the public sphere (Tan 2019c).

The encounter with the transgender group contributed to Aisyah's reflections about the transgender group's accounts of harsh treatment by the religious police such as name-calling and beatings during arrests, which she found troubling. Even though she insisted that LGBT individuals are not living their lives in a state of *fitrah* (Islamic theological concept denoting the innate and natural inclinations of human beings), she believed that such actions by the religious police are morally wrong because they "*menidakkan maruah mereka* [denied (LGBT individuals) their dignity]." She preferred that the religious police adopt a softer approach of counselling and religious education to curb public displays of the "LGBT lifestyle" rather than coercion via the enforcement of specific Syariah law that criminalise the LGBT Muslim community. Such reflections about prioritising religious education to secure believers' moral compliance willingly are similarly expressed by other Islamic activists and Syariah lawyers who are sceptical about using the force of "authority" to make Muslims more God-fearing (Tan 2012, p. 179).

However, sentiments like Aisyah's are rarely expressed publicly by the Islamic groups. Even though, the Islamic groups may disagree with aspects of Syariah implementation, their position on strengthening the Syariah system is, at least on the surface, aligned with the religious bureaucracy's push to expand the list of Syariah offences that regulate Muslims (Chapter 6). When Terengganu enacted a new Syariah legislation in 2022 that criminalised "females posing as males", it was SIS who issued a joint statement with a LBGT rights group to highlight the harms to transgenders.[65] The Islamic women activists felt ill-equipped to address social issues like mistreatment of the LGBT community themselves, which made them more understanding of the work by other women's groups. For instance, Sarah from Helwa ABIM acknowledged that groups like SIS played a role in amplifying the community's plight, arguing that "if I'm not the one who's taking care of them [LGBT] and this group is also not taking care of them, who's going to take care? So, for me, it's okay."

[65] Amendments to the Terengganu Syariah Enactment 2022 Violates Rights, Available at: https://sistersinislam.org/amendments-to-the-terengganu-syariah-enactment-2022-violates-rights-2/ (last accessed 12 March 2023)

ABIM and IKRAM's organisational approach of engaging non-Muslims through the principle of fostering inclusivity opened some of the Islamic women activists to experiences of being labelled pejoratively by other Muslim activists from the wider Islamic activism community, much in the same way that non-mainstream Muslim feminist groups like SIS have been labelled pejoratively by the religious authority. Such unexpected experiences though force the women to step outside of their Islamic social world to be more reflective of intra-Muslim differences. The realities of navigating a diverse society with competing demands also made them more aware of their own group's limitations in engaging with some social issues such as the mistreatment of the LGBT community. Rather than perceive other Muslim groups as potential threats then, some of the Islamic women activists believe that good could emerge from the plurality of Muslim voices. As Sarah argued, the different groups' focus on varied aspects of social problems could instead complement each other in ways that would be ultimately valuable to society.

7.2.2: Being Muslim and Feminist

> A lot of activists are also against Islam…If you wear the *tudung* (headscarf in Malay), if you wear the *hijab* (headscarf in Arabic), you know, you're a product of patriarchy, a very patriarchal religion, when it's not that. So, even in the activist groups as well, there's a lot of intolerance towards people who do embrace a belief system like Islam – Sofea, ARROW

The younger women activists (in their 20s to early 30s) from the secular multiracial and Islamic revivalist groups saw no conflict in being Muslim and feminist, but they also express an awareness that some within their own activist circles hold prejudiced views against other groups that reinforce a demarcation between Islam and feminism.[66] For example, Sofea from the secular multiracial group ARROW noted that some activists in secular circles view "Islam

[66] It is not unusual that Muslim women from secular groups or from the Islamic feminist group would see themselves as Muslim feminists (for e.g., the activists from SIS see themselves as Muslim feminists working on women's rights within an Islamic framework). However, it is notable for the Islamic activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM to be comfortable calling themselves feminist given the ideological differentiation discussed in Chapter Two. Furthermore, work on Islamic revivalist groups in other Muslim-majority contexts also point to ideological differences as key reasons for the delineation between feminists and Islamists (see Badron 1994; Salime 2011; Simga and Goker 2017).

as backwards and oppressing women" so they label women wearing headscarves as "a product of patriarchy". On the other side, Nur from Helwa ABIM noted that some within her Islamic group believe that "feminism was not borne out of Islamic values" and thus should be avoided, which is at odds with her own belief that "that if one actually wanted to be a genuine Islamist, they need to be feminist first." Notably, the older Islamic women activists (50 years and above) in this research argue that feminism is either incompatible with Islamic principles or unnecessary because Islam itself provided the basis for women's rights. The older women's perspectives contrast with perspectives from younger Islamic women activists like Nur who reference feminism in relation to their narrations about gender biases, which indicate a generational divide within the Islamic groups.[67]

The demarcation between Islam and feminism highlighted by Sofea and Nur is reflected in the two opposing frames of reference that activists had historically relied on in the quest to improve the state of women's rights – (1) human rights protocols such as the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that provided an international legal mandate for gender equality (2) the Islamists' use of religious references in the "call to return to Sharia" (Mir-Hosseini 2011, p. 69). Through the 1980s to the 1990s, the women's movement in postcolonial Muslim-majority countries had relied on human rights discourse and protocols to pinpoint the various forms of gender-based discrimination within cultural traditions and religious practices (Mir Hosseini 2011). The women's reliance on human rights discourse contrasted with the statist approach by many postcolonial Muslim countries to use Islam to regulate Muslim identities in the quest to build a cohesive nation. The instrumental use of Islam in postcolonial Muslim countries to forge national identities contributed to regressive gender policies and legislations that negatively impacted women from dress codes to social relations (Haddad and Esposito, 1998; Mohamed 2010; Cesari 2017). The different approaches pitted women's groups along religious and secular lines widening the gap between "Islamists" and "feminists" (Mir-Hosseini 2011, p. 69). As Chapter Two had detailed, the ideological differentiation between the women's groups in Malaysia contributed to perceptions of a divide between Islam and feminism – the Islamic women activists from the *dakwah* revivalist groups upheld Islam as a cultural and religious bulwark against secularism while the urban women's groups relied on feminist principles and

[67] All of the activists from secular multiracial groups in this research were in their 20s (see Chapter 5 for the explanation) so a comparison could not be made on generational divides within secular multiracial groups.

cultivated secular multiracial spaces for their advocacy work. Even though, the Muslim women activists from SIS acts as a bridge between the two opposing frames for women's rights by advocating for gender equality through rereading Islamic texts with a feminist lens, SIS activist Najwa highlighted that their group had been criticised by both Islamic and secular groups – on one hand, SIS is "Islamophobic for raising questions that challenge Islam" and on the other hand, SIS reinforces Islamism "because Islam is inherently unjust to women." Feminism was long perceived by many Malaysians as a Western construct that exemplified the evils and decadence of Western culture (Ariffin 1999). In fact, the opposing frames of reference continue to characterise contention between women's groups in contemporary Malaysia. For instance, Wanita IKRAM published a book in 2017 which put forward arguments that aspects of gender equality in CEDAW contradicted the Islamic view of women's rights.[68] Calls by secular women's groups in Malaysia to implement a gender equality act under the international human rights protocols were opposed by new groups such as the Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations (MACSA), which was formed in 2017. ABIM and IKRAM are members of MACSA. Groups like MACSA oppose the blanket acceptance of gender equality under CEDAW on the grounds that it conflicts with Syariah law (see MACSA statement by Amin and Mokhtar 2018a).

In this context then, the younger women activists from secular multiracial and Islamic groups who express perspectives that unsettle the divide between Islam and feminism are noteworthy. For example, Sofea from ARROW said that some of her fellow activists in secular circles are unable to see the need to reference what Islam has to say about human rights in their activism. Sofea highlighted that this tendency sometimes influenced the activists to rely on examples of feminism that would not resonate with the majority Muslim population in the Malaysian context. During a planning for a gender equality workshop targeted at Malaysian students, Sofea noted that her feminist friends wanted to use women's marches and protests as examples of feminist empowerment. Sofea was critical of this approach, arguing that Malay students would not relate to "women parading in the streets" because of the negative image of feminist marches in the West where women flaunted "nipples and stuff."[69] Instead, Sofea pointed out

[68] Wanita IKRAM press release available at: https://www.facebook.com/WanitaIkramMalaysia/posts/beritabuku-mengenai-impak-cedaw-syria-dilancarkanbandar-baru-bangi-wanita-pertub/1479411408807240/ (last accessed 20 March 2023).

[69] By this, Sofea was highlighting that the optics of marches invoked the topless protest tactics used by feminist groups such as FEMEN to attack Muslim communities (e.g., FEMEN's International Topless Jihad Day), which have been critiqued as a form of Western imperial feminism (see Colpean 2020).

that the local context provides ample examples of female empowerment but tend to be ignored – for example, she noted that the *tudung*-clad "*makcik* [aunties] who sell *kueh* [Malay desserts] on the streets" during the COVID-19 pandemic to earn extra income to help support their families would be more relatable to Malay students as localised examples of female empowerment. Sofea noted that "a lot of our advocacy work can be done through Islamic values that we have but it's not being done" because most activists in secular circles lack an "Islamic lens." On the other hand, Sofea lamented that the Islamic women activists lack a "gender equality" lens because they rarely contextualise Islamic discourse in the struggles faced by Muslim women such as domestic abuse. According to Sofea, the best approach for Muslim activists would be to have both an "Islamic lens" and a "gender equality" lens.[70]

> I told them [ABIM activists] that I couldn't compromise with a programme that has manels [all male panels]. I just left [the organising group]. I mean I said it already, but they kept on doing the same thing. And they said: 'oh, we couldn't find someone.' It's not true because we have like 64% of women in university compared to men. You cannot say that we don't have proper women or proper [female] professor to talk about that specific topic – Nur, Helwa ABIM

Nur argued that there was a need to cultivate male feminists in Islamic groups, but the idea was not "palatable" in Islamic groups where women still do much of the supportive work compared to men. She highlighted manels (all male panels) as an example of how male speakers tend to feature prominently in ABIM programmes. As a matter of principle, Nur refused to help organise ABIM programmes that featured manels because she argued that there are more than enough qualified women in Malaysia to invite for speaking engagements.[71] It was her way to change the culture of gender bias within her group. Nur referenced feminism and gender equity as she articulated her thoughts about gender biases within her group and the wider Malaysian society. Nur rejected the idea that being feminist was not Islamic, arguing that the idea of democracy is rooted in human-derived philosophies and theories and yet Islamic organisations have adopted democratic principles as values. For Nur, human-derived ideas that are beneficial

[70] This is the position that SIS adopts in its Islamic feminist approach.
[71] In recent years, the average enrollment of females in Malaysian public universities is 60% and 56% of academicians working in the public universities are women; the number of full female professors is 34% (Ahmad 2021).

and do not go against Islam are perfectly acceptable: “so I am a feminist as long as it’s not against Islam.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Hana from Wanita IKRAM, who said being a “Muslim feminist” to her meant countering the still-prevalent notion in Malaysian society that women should merely focus on their family after marriage. Hana, who was doing PhD studies while juggling responsibilities as a young mother, aimed to demonstrate to other women through her own life choices that women should not “just handle the house responsibilities” and limit their capacity to contribute to the betterment of society.

The view from Hani from the secular multiracial group Dear Her best summed up the sentiments expressed by these younger women activists: “There’s so many rights or so many teachings in Islam that are feminism…Just because you don’t brand it as feminism that doesn’t mean it isn’t feminism.” For these younger activists, the idea that feminism and Islam is incommensurable is not meaningful when juxtaposed with their everyday lives where they encounter challenges on account of their Malay, Muslim, and female identities. Although no longer wearing a *tudung* today, Sofea highlighted a stage in her teenage years when she did so out of a personal conviction to be more pious. So, she appreciated the convictions of Muslim women who choose to do so rather than viewing *tudung*-wearing women as products of patriarchy. With this stance, Sofea is effectively recognising the agentic capacity of religious women that Mahmood argues reside in “not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood 2005, p. 15). Sofea and Hani were both educated in the International Islamic University of Malaysia, which they say helped them to cultivate the “Islamic lens” in their activism that Sofea suggested other activists in secular circles lack. This “lens” made them more attuned to prejudice within their own secular multiracial circles. On the other side, Nur and Hana from the Islamic groups believed that it is unfair for women to be prevented or side-lined from using their knowledge and skills to contribute to society. Hence, Nur and Hana explain the gender biases they encounter in their Islamic groups through a “Muslim feminist” lens.

For these younger activists, navigating routine challenges while living their lives as Muslims and females rendered the ideological division between feminism and Islam inconsequential. Rather than the oppositional dichotomy of religious (Islam) and secular (feminism) worldviews, the women activists have instead cultivated an understanding of themselves as both Muslim and feminist to critique the prejudice and bias they encounter within their circles. This interconnection between faith and feminism in the cultivation of new Muslim identities

has been noted in several other Muslim-majority countries such as in countries like Indonesia, Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt, with women redefining their place in the public sphere by relying on religious justifications in the push for expanded rights (Rinaldo 2013; Jung et al 2014; Civek 2019; Nisa 2019; Biagini 2020). In the Malaysian context, where contention between women's groups continues to be characterised by public rhetoric that Islam and feminism are oppositional, these younger women's understandings may not yet carry a force to influence the ideological positioning within their groups on a massive scale; for example, the Islamic women activists still tend to oppose gender equality on account of their legalistic understandings of *wali* (male guardian) and the implications under Syariah law (Chapter Six). However, the understandings coming out of their own encounters with prejudice and gender bias help them to acknowledge commonalities with other women activists due to their Malay, Muslim, and female identities. This recognition of common experiences as Malay Muslim females makes them more willing to trust in the expected good will of other Malay women groups.

7.2.3: Reducing Teenage Pregnancy and Early Marriage

> We advise about contraceptives because we need to see which one is more *darar* (Islamic principle on prevention of harm), which one will bring more bad impact. If they were [to get] pregnant [again] and have a second baby, the impact will be worse, rather than just taking it (contraception). Yeah, yeah, actually, this issue is still sensitive in Malaysia. So, what we do is that we give them the knowledge, we give the awareness so that they can make choices – Sarah, Helwa ABIM

Both Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM run shelter homes for unmarried pregnant teenage girls. They do this as a response to the social problem of teenage pregnancy among young Muslim girls[72], and to curb the issue of baby dumping. Malaysia has the highest percentage of baby dumping cases across Southeast Asia (an average of 100 cases per year), with social stigma and inadequate sex education cited as contributing factors (Shukri 2022). Recent figures cited by the Malaysian government indicate that there were approximately 41,000 teen

[72] Malaysia records teenage pregnancy as one in which the mother's age is between 10 and 19 years (Nagandla and Kumar 2020).

pregnancies between 2017 and 2022, with 35% of them occurring outside of marriage (CodeBlue 2021).

Parents often urge marriage for unwed pregnant teenage girls to avoid social stigma since abortion is only legal in cases when the mother's mental and physical health is at risk (Shukri 2022). Sex outside of marriage (*zina*) is considered a grave sin in Muslim societies due to the religious dictate that *zina* is harmful to both the individual and society. Hence, the issue of teenage pregnancy is also linked to the issue of early marriages. In a 2018 joint report with the secular multiracial women's group ARROW, SIS cited religious dogmatism and moral shaming of sexual relations outside marriage as driving forces behind the continued failure to institute Syariah law reforms on the minimum age of marriage. Some Islamic groups are reluctant to advocate setting the marriageable age at 18 years for Muslim girls because it would restrict the discretionary power of the Syariah court to determine whether Muslim girls aged 16 years and below can marry; marriage is seen by some parents and religious authorities as a solution in cases of premarital sexual relations and teenage pregnancies (Amin and Mokhtar 2018b).[73]

> SIS notes, with concern, that the main reason for child marriage is culture, tradition, and a low tolerance for young children engaging with the opposite sex. Furthermore, religion remains the most significant stumbling block to law reform and building a good foundation towards societal change of mindset on this issue (as well as other issues affecting and impacting women) which requires action by public authorities such as discussion on safe abortion, contraception, sex education and so on (SIS & ARROW 2018, p. 28).

Therefore, sex education is a controversial topic in Malaysia – cultural and religious norms continue to influence the national sex education programme for primary and secondary school students under the *Pendidikan Kesihatan Reproduktif dan Sosial* (Reproductive Health and Social Education, PEERS) to be heavily focused on abstinence (Lee and Khor 2021). The PEERS curriculum discourages sex by instilling fears about unwanted pregnancies and

[73] The legal marriageable age in most states in Malaysia under Syariah law is set at 16 for females and 18 for males, and the Syariah judges hold the discretion of permitting legal marriages for those younger than the legal marriageable ages.

sexually transmitted diseases, which advocates of comprehensive sex education argue are ineffective in preventing teenage pregnancies (Lee and Khor 2021).

Given this context, Sarah's account about the inclusion of contraception information in the educational classes run at the Helwa ABIM shelter home was surprising. While the classes taught abstinence as an Islamic virtue to avoid the sin of pre-marital sexual relations, Sarah stressed that including information on contraception is necessary. In the three years that Sarah worked at the shelter, she and her fellow activists came to realise that most of the pregnant girls they encountered were "naïve", lacking basic understanding on sexual reproduction, relationships, and motherhood. As such, in addition to religious counselling, the shelter also offers sex education despite it being considered "sensitive" in Malaysia. Sarah argued that there was a risk that some girls may not be as religiously motivated to avoid sexual relations, and without adequate sex education they may end up getting pregnant for a second time. Using the Islamic principle of *darar* (preventing harms) to rationalise sex education, Sarah concluded that the social harm of a second unwanted pregnancy out of wedlock outweighed moral objections on the possible social harms of teaching about contraception.[74] For girls who are deemed to be recalcitrant (i.e., high risk to resume sexual activities after leaving the shelter), Sarah added that the shelter would arrange for visits to a clinic where the girls would be further educated on contraceptive options by a doctor.

Sarah also stressed that as a rule the shelter do not encourage the girls to get married to their babies' fathers, who are usually teenagers themselves. The Helwa ABIM activists adopted this position because they saw that many of these teenage marriages later ended in divorce due to the couples' lack of maturity and issues with financial stability.[75] Instead, Sarah encouraged the girls to return to school, facilitating school registrations for some of the girls who wished to do so. However, in doing so, Sarah encountered a few parents who opposed her. In such instances, Sarah became more attuned to just how differently she perceived the issue from parts of Malaysian society. She struggled "with their [the parents] way of thinking", which she attributed to patriarchy. Still, Sarah recognised that she needed to "accept that they already

[74] Some groups like the International Women's Alliance for Family and Quality Education (WAFIQ) in Malaysia oppose comprehensive sex education (CSE) including teaching about the use of contraception on the moral grounds that CSE promotes a culture of sexual freedom (considered a social harm in an Eastern society) over abstinence and other sexual risk avoidance behaviours (Nusaybah 2019).

[75] In contrast to the cultural norms in Malaysia that push for marriage in teenage pregnancy cases, Sarah stated that only three to five girls married their babies' fathers out of the more than 50 cases she handled at the shelter over the past three years.

have that kind of thinking" and work around it. Furthermore, Sarah highlighted that Helwa ABIM's positions on sex education open them up to critique from other Islamic groups that they are "supporting *zina*."

The pragmatic positions on sex education and early marriages adopted by Sarah and her fellow Helwa ABIM activists in the running of the shelter then were shaped by their own experiences with the teenage girls they sought to help. The Helwa ABIM activists did not publicly support SIS and the secular multiracial groups' calls for a blanket ban on all marriages below 18 years on account that this may limit the discretionary power of the Syariah courts (see Chapter Six). Yet they effectively adopt the same stance in practice within the shelter home when they encourage the girls to return to school after giving birth rather than get married and include information about contraception in the educational programmes for the girls. On this issue then, the women activists share similar perspectives which help to promote trust in the expected good will of other Malay women groups.

7.3: Overcoming Prejudice of the Other

Trust entails an expectation of future (positive) behaviours of the other group and allows for a readiness to take risks in relation to the other group (Van Lange et al 2017; Bar-Tal and Alon 2016; Govier 1997). In situations where there are known conflicts of interest between groups, trusting the other group enough to sit at the same table involves an expectation of good will or benevolence (Yamagishi 2011). As such, the women activists' choices to engage with each other in the current Malaysian context where there are known conflicts of interest indicate that the women may have hold some expectations of good will from women in other groups and that they are willing to take the reputational risk to engage based on this.

However, it is also possible that the more powerful groups may have been willing to take risks to engage, even if they did not believe in the trustworthiness and expected good will of the other less powerful groups (Bar-Tal and Alon 2016). The more powerful groups are willing to take such risks because they can disengage when they need to, and they also can more easily withstand potential risks or deflect dangers to their own group (Bar-Tal and Alon 2016). In the Malaysian context, the Islamic women's groups can be regarded as more powerful (in this case, their power comes from being more influential) in society compared to the Islamic feminist

and secular multiracial women's groups because the ideological viewpoints of the Islamic women's groups are aligned with the mainstream social understanding of Islam, Malay culture and gender norms.[76] The Islamic groups have been instrumental to social change in Malaysia, contributing to the increased religiosity of Malays and Muslims through their proselytising and religious education activities since the 1970s (Nagata 1980; Abu-Bakar 1981; Shamsul 1997; Abbot and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). Based on their longstanding reputation as supporters of Islamisation and the Syariah system, it is possible that the Islamic women activists believe that they can manage potential reputational risks which might come from engaging with Muslim groups such as SIS who are known to forward alternative views of Islam that have been labelled deviant by the religious authority. However, this explanation in and of itself does not adequately explain why the Islamic women's groups, being more influential in society, would want to engage with the less influential women's groups in Malaysia (especially with groups that are viewed negatively in society) unless they perceive that there is some benefit to be had.

A closer analysis of the women's perspectives through the decolonial feminist standpoint lens offers a more compelling explanation. The women's personal experiences in the course of their advocacy work, where pragmatism in problem-solving rather than strict adherence to ideology was sometimes necessary, made them confront their assumptions and biases and to be more reflective of their own thoughts and actions. By navigating unexpected or complicated situations and making pragmatic choices in the course of their advocacy work, the women had to intellectually move between social worlds, and in doing so, became more aware of their shared common experiences as Malay Muslim females with other women activists.

The concept of world-traveling discussed in Chapter Three notes that women tend to traverse multiple social worlds, and in doing so, they can experience a state of unease (Lugones 2003). This state of unease is a liminal space between different social worlds where a woman becomes aware of her own multiplicity – i.e., the idea that a woman who moves between multiple social locations experiences a condition of in-betweenness and becomes more aware of the different aspects to her identity (Ortega 2016). In the three themes analysed in the previous sections, the women activists encountered situations that required them to intellectually step out of their

[76] Conversely, SIS would be considered more influential on the international stage because its advocacy positions on women's rights are aligned with the standards set by global human rights protocols, and their work is promoted and known in transnational women's networks. Several Islamic activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM believe that SIS likely secured more foreign funding for its work than their groups because of its positive international reputation.

own social world, i.e., having to step outside of their comfort zone to engage with or confront different perspectives that could not always be categorised neatly into ideological worldviews. Having to navigate different social worlds and make pragmatic choices enabled the women to acknowledge common experiences and similar thinking that they share with other women activists over social problems such as racial and gender biases and teenage pregnancies and early marriages. More importantly, the liminal space between the social worlds allowed the women to become aware of, and resist, the "colonial difference", i.e., the hierarchical differences between groups of people that are constructed and maintained through identity markers that have been made salient from the colonial experience through to the present times (Lugones 2010). For instance, Sofea's critique of those within secular activist circles who labelled *tudung*-wearing "religious" women as "products of patriarchy" was her way to resist the coloniality of secularism where the cultivation of secular and liberal norms is promoted as a necessary step in the effort to progress women's rights and their empowerment. Teaching sex education and encouraging the unwed pregnant teen girls to return to school was Sarah's way to resist the harmful but dominant patriarchal norms in society, which insist on abstinence-only teachings and early marriage as solutions to the sins of pre-marital sex and babies born out of wedlock.

This implicit acknowledgment of shared experiences and thinking between the women activists is a new development. Since the country's independence, women activists from the different ideological groups had encountered each other through stakeholder meetings organised by groups like the National Council for Women's Organisations (NCWO), but they were divided "between 'Islamized' women and others (including non-Muslims) who remained outside the Islamization project." (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 23). As Putri from Helwa ABIM noted, the previous generations of activists had "refused to talk to Sisters in Islam" due to the prejudiced views of SIS within her group. Those prejudiced views about SIS were inherited by Putri's generation too. Yet, Putri who was in a leadership position within Helwa ABIM at the time (in 2016) decided then there was a need for women's groups "to support each other especially in the issue of women and children in Malaysia." As the previous discussion showed, this change in attitude from avoiding those who are ideologically different over prejudiced views to willingness to engage was shaped through the women's encounters of a more complicated political context where they were forced to navigate differences that entailed stepping out of their comfort zones – for e.g., Asiyah's interaction with the transgender group. In doing so, some of them came to recognise that no single group could hope to resolve

complicated social problems by itself. Anzaldúa's concept of borderlands as cultural spaces where people navigate multiple identities and negotiate differences to form new forms of identities and cultures (Anzaldúa 1987) explains why the women activists in this research were more willing in recent times to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. The women's experiences of having to step outside of their own social worlds and navigate the borderlands facilitated the blurring of the secular feminist vs religious demarcation between "Islamised women" and others that had characterised women's activism in contemporary Malaysia.

Therefore, Lugones' world-traveling concept (2003) provides a compelling explanation as to why the women's perspectives and pragmatic actions did not always stem from their group's self-declared ideological leanings. Instead, the argument here is that the women's experiences of having to move between different social worlds shaped them to be more receptive to understanding and navigating different ways to view the world rather than perceiving those different ways solely as threats to be neutralised. Their experiences then facilitated recent inter-group engagements because the women were more willing to trust in the expectation of good will by other women activists.[77]

7.4: Social Learning

The recent inter-group engagements between the women's groups opened opportunities for social learning between the women activists. Social learning is a form of learning that occurs in an individual through observation, modelling and imitation of others, and which changes an individual's understanding of the world and their relationship to it (Bandura 1977). Later conceptualisations of social learning also emphasise that the learning should be situated not only at the individual level but also within wider social units or communities of practice, and the learning should occur through social interactions between actors in a social network (Reed et al 2010). Essentially, for social learning to have occurred, there must be (1) a change in understanding either at the surface level (e.g., recalling new information) or at a deeper level

[77] There was one exception to this. While Umairah from SIS, acknowledged that the Islamic women activists were now more willing to "learn about feminism" through engagement with SIS and secular multiracial women's groups, she expressed suspicion that Islamic activists were arrogant because they "believe that their strand of feminism is much more Islamic than SIS." Nevertheless, her suspicion did not prevent her from engaging with the Islamic women activists during inter-group events.

(e.g., change in attitudes, world views or epistemological beliefs); (2) situated in a social unit or community, i.e., there is diffusion of ideas and attitudes learned by some group members to the other group members; (3) the learning occurs through social interaction (Reed et al 2010). Based on this conceptualisation of social learning, there are two recent accounts of social learning that had occurred between the women activists from Helwa ABIM and SIS and secular multiracial groups – (1) sexual harassment policy (2) telephone hotline counselling service.

7.4.1: Sexual Harassment Policy

> We work closely with them [AWAM]. So, they teach us about how to build sexual harassment policies. Yeah, actually, before this, we [did] not really seriously talk about this. Maybe because we think that all of our members are very kind and will not [be] involved in these bad activities, but we don't know, right? So, in order to have good surroundings, a safe circle for our members, so this policy is very important for that…We develop our policies and want to implement in ABIM – Sarah, Helwa ABIM

Most of the women activists from the different women's groups cited sexual harassment as a major social problem that affected females in Malaysia. Secular multiracial women's groups such as the All Women's Action Society (AWAM) and Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) – in partnership with other likeminded women's groups such as SIS through the coalition, Joint Action Group-Violence Against Women (JAG-VAW) – have had a long history of advocating on issues related to sexual harassment. For instance, starting in 2000, JAG-VAW spearheaded calls for a specific law against sexual harassment but progress stalled after employers' bodies such as the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) opposed it; under the bill proposed by JAG-VAW, employers and companies could be held legally responsible for not ensuring that a work environment is free from sexual harassment (Ng, Mohamed and Tan, 2006). After the PH government came to power in 2018, the secular multiracial women's groups renewed their push to lobby the new government to enact two new bills on anti-sexual harassment and on gender equality. Part of this push by the secular multiracial groups entailed engaging with Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM to build consensus on the proposed new bills.

Putri from Helwa ABIM and Farah from Wanita IKRAM both highlighted that their groups had responded positively to these engagements – Islamic activists engaged in meetings and training sessions on the issue of sexual harassment with AWAM from 2018 onwards. For Helwa ABIM, the training sessions with AWAM appeared to be part of ABIM's larger strategy to develop its women activists to become specialised in women's and children's rights. As Putri highlighted, the training sessions for its activists were an opportunity to spearhead an internal reform within Islamic groups because most Islamic women activists are not "well-trained" in women's and children's rights. Putri's suggestion that its activists are not well-trained or specialised in women's rights mirror Sofea's critique that Islamic women activists generally lack the "gender equality" lens because Islamic groups focus primarily on *dakwah* (proselytization) activities and grassroots charity work.

The training sessions with AWAM provoked a change in attitudes among the Helwa ABIM activists, which is an important element in social learning. As Sarah noted, sexual harassment was not an issue that Islamic activists had previously considered important within their group because the assumption was that Islamic activists being pious Muslims would not be involved in "bad activities" such as sexual harassment. The changed attitudes of those who attended the training sessions with AWAM turned out to be impactful within the wider group. Not only did Helwa ABIM support AWAM's proposed anti-sexual harassment bill, but they also decided to formulate and implement an internal anti-sexual harassment policy for its ABIM members. Sarah noted that the Helwa ABIM activists started talking about the problem of sexual harassment with other members including with the male ABIM activists. As such, there was a diffusion of the ideas from the Helwa ABIM activists who underwent the training to the other members in the group. The dialogue within their group eventually led to Helwa ABIM proposing to adopt an anti-sexual harassment policy for ABIM. Their proposal was later approved by ABIM's leaders and implemented as an ABIM policy.

When the issue of sexual harassment later became national news in the wake of a viral Tiktok video where a young female student accused her male teacher of making rape jokes in class, Helwa ABIM took an unambiguous public stance against the normalisation of sexual harassment through the guise of "outrageous jokes" in society (Nordin 2021). Helwa ABIM also urged the government to table the anti-sexual harassment bill in parliament, adopting the

same public stance on the matter with the secular multiracial groups (and SIS).[78] By adopting this stance, Helwa ABIM is recognising gendered harms in society – through social learning then, the group is effectively developing gender as a lens to parse social problems, which is contrary to Sofea's critique that Islamic groups could not do this because of their singular focus on religion.

7.4.2: Talian Rahmah (Mercy Hotline)

> I just asked them [SIS], that we want to start this [Talian Rahmah hotline] … And they share with us their experience to handle Telenisa and how they put lawyers on the line, and the do's and don'ts to cater the lines, the helpline. And MasyaAllah [Arabic term to express admiration], it helps us much on that because it's not really easy to handle calls without training. We have trainings, but the experience [sharing by SIS] helps us much, and Telenisa is very wonderful – Aisyah, Helwa ABIM

Since 2003, SIS has provided a free legal helpline (Telenisa) for Muslim women to obtain information on Islamic law matters. As such, SIS has developed considerable expertise in managing the helpline. SIS also publishes insightful reports on the type of problems faced by Muslim women based on the data it obtains from the calls to the helpline. Aisyah shared that she had wanted to create a psychological and counselling support team, Rahmah Support Team (Mercy Support Team) with its own helpline, Talian Rahmah (Mercy Hotline) to help women who needed emotional health support. Aisyah had initially perceived SIS as "rivals" because of the ideological differences between their groups. However, she was inspired by her group's tentative engagements with SIS to pay closer attention to the work by SIS activists. Aisyah expressed admiration for the work that SIS did for Malaysian women, saying that Helwa ABIM activists could learn a lot from the "superb" activism work that SIS did, even if they could not always agree all the time. Aisyah's changed perception of SIS made her comfortable enough discuss her group's intention to start the Talian Rahmah hotline with SIS activists during a meeting in 2020. The obvious reason for this was because Aisyah was aware that SIS had successfully managed Telenisa for a long time, and she wanted to learn from them.

[78] The Malaysian government eventually passed the anti-sexual harassment bill the following year in 2022.

Aisyah's account about Talian Rahmah was indicative of social learning at two levels. At one level, Helwa ABIM activists had observed the success of the SIS-run helpline Telenisa and recognise its impact in helping Muslim women get legal information on Islamic law in family matters such as divorce and child custody. When Aisyah had the idea to create the psychological and counselling support team, she wanted to create the Talian Rahmah helpline that was modelled on what she knew had already worked with Telenisa. The idea that helplines were beneficial were adopted by the Helwa ABIM activists so that they were willing to spend the time and resources to implement one on their own. Helwa ABIM later launched its helpline during the COVID-19 national lockdowns in 2020. At the second level, by approaching SIS, sharing her ideas and seeking information, Aisyah was implicitly signalling trust and thereby created "small islands of cooperation and mutual recognition" as the women discussed the topic of helplines (Sztompka 2016, p. 19). Aisyah's decision to engage in this manner indicates that she held an expectation of goodwill from the SIS activists to willingly share their knowledge with her. Instead of perceiving SIS activists as ideological "rivals" as she had previously, Aisyah had changed her perception of them. The change in attitudes that Helwa ABIM activists held about SIS is a profound example of social learning that began with the tentative interactions between the two groups under Putri's (Helwa ABIM) leadership in 2016.

7.5: Conclusion

The preceding chapter provided an explanation rooted in decolonial feminism to argue that the women's experiences in the course of their advocacy work made them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. They were able to do this despite having knowledge of their ideological differences and past experiences of being on oppositional sides. Putnam had noted, "trust lubricates cooperation", meaning that there is a greater probability of cooperation when there is a greater level of trust within a social network (Putnam 1993, p. 171). The women's experiences of having to step outside of their own social worlds to navigate diverse and complex situations helped to blur the divide between "Islamised women" and others that had characterised women's activism in contemporary Malaysia; their own experiences then helped to establish a modicum of trust in the expected good will of women activists from other groups. This facilitated inter-group engagements that opened opportunities for social learning with positive cooperative outcomes between the women activists.

It is notable that both examples of social learning involved Helwa ABIM activists engaged with secular multiracial groups and SIS. This is perhaps due to the relative youthful make-up of the group; as a youth group, the membership age limit for Helwa ABIM members is 40 years old so many of its leaders are in their 30s compared to the leaders in Wanita IKRAM who are older in their 50s and 60s. Furthermore, several of the Helwa ABIM members in this research have had an affiliation or worked in a professional capacity with the reformist-oriented political party, PKR; and PKR sees itself as forging the common ground by being the thread that holds together the different political party components, with their competing demands, within the Pakatan Harapan political coalition. As such, it is possible that the younger Helwa ABIM activists by virtue of being engaged in the sphere of electoral politics may have had to more frequently step outside of their own Islamic social worlds to navigate differences in similar borderland spaces where other women activists from secular multiracial groups and SIS are. However, this does not preclude the other women from social learning through inter-group interactions as the majority in this research recounted experiences that required them to step outside of their own social worlds. The question of how the women activists can build trustful relations to encourage more movement across the "fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears" that tend to keep women confined to their own social worlds (Mohanty 2003, p. 2) is addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight

Intersections Across Ideological Divides

"We don't have that trust anymore that the politicians will solve our problems, especially on these social issues…we must struggle to be always in the middle." – Aisyah, Helwa ABIM

8.1: Introduction

This empirical chapter analyses the intersections in the understandings of the Muslim women activists that cuts across the ideological divides of their groups. The previous chapter had explained why the women activists choose to engage with each other despite having knowledge of their ideological differences and past experiences of being on oppositional sides. The argument was that the women's own *experiences* in the course of their advocacy work had made them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about the other women's groups. The women activists had to navigate different social worlds and make pragmatic choices in problem-solving, which enabled them to implicitly acknowledge common experiences and similar thinking that they shared with other women activists over social issues such as racial and gender biases and teenage pregnancies and early marriages. Hence, their own experiences helped to establish a modicum of trust in the expected good will of women activists from other groups, which facilitated the recent inter-group engagements. However, more movement across the ideological divides that tend to keep women confined to their own social worlds can only occur if the women activists are able to build stronger relations of trust between themselves.

This chapter argues that the women activists can foster these stronger relations of trust when they can recognise that the intersections in their understandings come from their shared challenges and experiences as fellow Malay and Muslim women. Uslaner argues that trust has a moral dimension which is underpinned by an optimistic belief that others share the same moral values as yourself (Uslaner 2002). Those who hold moralistic trust are more willing to consider others, even those who may not carry the same ideological beliefs or policy opinions as themselves, as part of a shared wider community (Uslaner 2002). In this sense, moralistic trust is a form of generalised trust that differs from particularised trust where the trust is given to others in your group based on known shared group characteristics – for e.g., ethnicity,

religion, or ideology (Uslaner 2002). By contrast, those with moralistic trust hold on to the belief that the other groups will not let them down because they share moral values as members of a wider community. Moralistic trust then can help to promote civic engagement because of the belief that one's own fate is connected to the fate of others in the wider community (Uslaner 2002). As such, this chapter argues that moralistic trust can be cultivated if the women activists are able to recognise that they are part of a wider community of Malay and Muslim women with shared challenges and experiences.

The first section in this chapter analyses the intersections in the understandings of the women activists that cuts across the ideological divides of their groups. These intersections constitute areas of common ground where the women can cultivate a deeper sense of shared moral values and in doing so build bonds of moralistic trust as members in the wider community of Malay and Muslim women in Malaysia. The second section analyses the women's perspectives on fostering trust between different women's groups. The chapter concludes with reflections on the prospects and challenges for the emergence of a locally rooted and cross cutting Muslim feminism in Malaysia.

8.2: Common Ground

Through the decolonial feminist standpoint lens, this section analyses the intersections in understandings of the Muslim women activists that cuts across the ideological divides of their groups. This section argues that these intersections constitute areas where the women activists can more easily build the common ground to strengthen the relations of trust. Strengthened relations of trust would be needed for the genuine efforts at cooperation and compromise in other areas that would be more difficult to find agreement (for e.g., on areas that intersect gender and Islamic law), given the polarising forces of ethnic politics and religious nationalism in the wider political context discussed in earlier chapters. The three intersections in understandings identified from the women's narrations of their experiences that are analysed in this section are on: (1) sexist oppression (2) labels (3) polarised politics.

8.2.1: Sexism

One key intersection in the women activists' understandings was the belief that women in Malaysia were being relegated to a subordinate position in relation to men because of dominant sexist societal norms and standards. The women narrated several examples of sexism, which I have categorised as motherhood penalty, androcentrism, and resistance to women in leadership roles. In these narrations, the women expressed sentiments of frustration because they believed women in Malaysia were being treated unfairly primarily because of the gender stereotypes that were attached to their female sex.

<u>Motherhood Penalty</u>

> I opened a [bank] account for Helwa, only for the women's wing. And I got some objection, why the women's wing want to make up your own account and so forth. I still remember that I struggled with them [ABIM male activists]…and I say, I know what to do with this…When they [female kindergarten teachers at ABIM schools] give birth [and go on] maternity leave, the *men don't see that as an important thing*…For maternity leave, I think, at that time they [female teachers] were given half pay….I just opened an account and I do it [fundraising] myself, and I give allowances to the teachers when they go for maternity leave and everything…I'm doing that because the men, *they just can't see* – Aisyah, Helwa ABIM

Aisyah noted that she became motivated to attempt to change the unfair treatment of women within her group when she moved from the ABIM headquarters in Selangor to an ABIM district branch in Perak. Aisyah was already uncomfortable that the women activists were expected to do the most of the "clerical work" and the cooking for events that ABIM organised; the expectation within ABIM that women activists do administrative work and cooking duties also occurred at the offices in the city area of Selangor. Because of her organising experience at the ABIM headquarters, Aisyah was appointed to a leadership position at the Helwa ABIM district branch in Perak. When she realised that the female teachers at ABIM kindergartens in that district were receiving half pay when they went on maternity leave, she voiced her disagreement with the practice to the ABIM male leadership. Aisyah argued that even though

the female teachers went on maternity leave, they still had to keep to their financial commitments and familial responsibilities (including supporting sick or elderly parents) on top of taking care of their new-born child.

While motherhood is revered in Islamic revivalist groups like ABIM, the half pay during maternity leave effectively imposed a "motherhood penalty" on the female kindergarten teachers that the male teachers and the childless female teachers avoided because they could earn the full wages in that same period (Gough and Noonan 2013). Studies have shown that such wage gaps remain long after women workers return to their jobs from maternity leave so women are often worse off financially for taking time off work for child-rearing responsibilities (Gough and Noonan 2013). The male leadership justified the half pay on the basis that the school would spend more to hire a new teacher to cover the teaching load of the absent teacher on maternity leave. While Aisyah said she could understand that ABIM as a volunteer-run Islamic group had problems securing funding for its activities, she also believed that the male leadership did not understand the challenges faced by the female teachers while they were on maternity leave. Despite initial opposition from the male leadership, Aisyah opened a separate bank account for the women's wing and raised money through her own initiative to fund maternity leave allowances for the female teachers.

Androcentrism

What is striking in Aisyah's account is her recognition that the "men…just can't see" which motivated her to step up on her own to find ways to help support the female teachers. As the discussion on the feminist standpoint in Chapter Three had highlighted, since men constitute the dominant social group, they do not have to be attuned to women and their activities to function in society in the same way that women have to be attuned to men and their activities (Jaggar 2004). Men's perspective of social life is naturalised due to their dominant position in society, that is, androcentrism (Harding 1991). In this situation recounted by Aisyah, the male leadership simply could not recognise the numerous challenges faced by female teachers as they juggled their financial commitments and family responsibilities while caring for their new-born child during maternity leave. As such, the male leadership weighted the women's concerns over half pay as less important than the practicality of running the schools on a budget, so they did not seek to raise additional funds for the female teachers on maternity leave.

However, Aisyah could more easily recognise the female teachers' challenges because she was seeing them from her social location as a fellow woman (Smith 1987).

Furthermore, as Chapter Six had highlighted, Islamic revivalist groups like ABIM emphasise that it is the men's primary responsibility, and not the women's, to earn money to support their families. The Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM had expressed support for this utopian portrayal of the sexual division of labour – wherein men are required to work and provide financially for the family while leaving the women free to raise children at home and pursue paid work only out of her own free choice and interests. Yet the fact that the reduced pay while on maternity leave was viewed as hardship to some of the female teachers indicate that at least some of them worked as teachers in the ABIM-run schools out of financial necessity rather than choice. Notwithstanding Aisyah's ideological support for the sexual division of labour, she recognised that even though the women were married and had husbands to support them, the maternity allowance she sourced for the female teachers was a much-needed financial assistance. Aisyah's fundraising initiative was her struggle to make the standpoint of the female teachers be seen and heard because it was not visible to the male leadership (Hartsock 2019). Pragmatism rather than ideology then guided Aisyah's response to the situation.

Aisyah's understanding here connects her with women activists from the other groups who hold similar understandings about women being disadvantaged because the perspectives of men (and their blind spots) structure societal norms and standards. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 6.4.1.1, Umairah from SIS argued that a male friend who chose to interpret a specific *hadith* (Prophet's sayings) on the prohibition of forced marriages of daughters by parents and guardians as merely "advisory" rather than a ruling had done so because his reasoning was rooted in the "men's way of thinking." The "men's way of thinking" in Umairah's example reinforced sexist bias in the concept of *wilāyah*, which is understood as the right and duty of male family members to exercise guardianship over female members. By interpreting the *hadith* as "advisory", Umairah's friend had elevated male guardianship over women's agency to have a say in the choice of a marriage partner. Chapter 6.4.1.2 had also highlighted that Aina and Najwa from SIS pointed out that many women in Malaysia needed to work to help support their families, with more single mothers being the "providers and protectors of their families." Even though the women are from different ideological groups – Aisyah is from an Islamic revivalist group and Umairah, Aina and Najwa are from an Islamic feminist group – what

connects them is the shared understanding that women's legitimate concerns are being rendered invisible due to the dominant sexist social structures and practices. By focusing on the shared understanding on the disadvantages of women in the practical realities of routine life, the women activists can avoid reinforcing divisive differences through ideological arguments that tend to promote distrust – for e.g., whether the *wilāyah* (male guardianship) concept should continue to be legally relevant in contemporary Malaysian Muslim society or not.

Resistance to Women in Leadership Roles

The sexist social structures and practices that disadvantage women also exist in spaces where women are numerically in the majority such as in universities, which indicates that the problem of women's subordination due to gender stereotypes is ingrained in wider society.[79] As representatives of the younger demographic (under 25 years old) of women activists in this research, both Sofea and Balqis (from the secular multiracial groups, ARROW and Malaysian Youths for Education Reform respectively) narrated experiences where they felt unfairly put down during their university studies because of their female sex.

> So, apparently like no woman should be leading the programme but…I was offered the position and many people were making rumours and making noise about it. Like, why is this woman whose *hijab* [headscarf] is not long enough, you know, going to lead the orientation programme and it went to the extent where the male staff [at the university] themselves harassed me. To me, that was the point where I really felt, you know, this is utter bullshit, just because I'm a woman, you don't see my qualifications and my capacity – Sofea, ARROW

Sofea was offered a leadership position in an orientation programme during her first year at university. She later found out that she was the first female student who had been offered that position. Her acceptance of the leadership position though was not looked upon favourably by some people within the university administration, including some of the students. For instance,

[79] The average enrollment of females in Malaysian public universities is 60% and 56% of academicians working in the public universities are women (Ahmad 2021).

she was criticised for not wearing a long enough *hijab*. Sofea later came to know that that some of the male staff[80] had taken pictures of her socialising with her group of friends (males and females) at a school café and posted the pictures in a WhatsApp group to criticise her for "mixing" with males; these pictures then were spread in the university. Sofea surmised that the criticisms were attempts to get her to step down because some people at the university believed that women are not supposed to be in public leadership positions. However, Sofea refused to step down and confronted those who spread "rumours" about her, which eventually made her detractors back away. What is significant in Sofea's account is the attempt by her detractors at moral policing to justify their disapproval of Sofea's appointment to the leadership position – in their eyes, it was the shorter length of her *hijab* and her socialising with fellow male students, and not her qualifications and capacity for the role, that deemed her unsuitable. Moral policing in this manner, where the woman's body and her conduct in public spaces are regulated, creates social pressures for Malay women to conform to traditional gender norms, which tend to keep them subordinated to men (Othman 2006).

Similarly, Balqis narrated an experience where she was harshly put down by her male lecturer in front of her classmates because he did not agree with her arguments on the value of encouraging more women and youth participation in politics. The male lecturer belittled her ideas claiming that it was better to entrust older men to lead the country instead because they had "*banyak makan garam* [eaten a lot of salt]." With the reference to the Malay proverb on *banyak makan garam*, the male lecturer meant that older men would have had more life experiences compared to women and the youth, so older men would be better equipped to lead a country. By the logic of the lecturer then, older women's life experiences were not as important in politics as that of older men. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Malaysia continues to have one of the lowest percentages of elected female parliamentarians[81] in Southeast Asia due in part to the prevailing cultural and religious beliefs that women are unsuited to politics (Mohamed 2018). Just as Aina from SIS was highly critical of conservative Muslim voices in society who claimed women should not be leaders because of a *hadith* saying[82] (see discussion in Chapter 6.4.1.2), Putri from Helwa ABIM who had recently joined the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR) political party echoed the exact same sentiments: "I've seen a

[80] Sofea did not elaborate whether the male staff worked in academic positions or in non-academic positions.
[81] In the recent 2022 Malaysian general elections, women constituted only 13.4% of the total candidates, and women won 30 of the 222 seats in the federal parliament.
[82] The *hadith* attributes the following quote to the Prophet Muhammad: "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler" (Al-Bukhari n.d.).

lot of women leaderships in Pakatan Harapan and PKR…they work really hard to serve the people. So that's really inspiring…because we've seen a lot of potential women leaders, but they're not given the right place and position to lead the people. That's our fight every day, discrimination, sexism…I think when you actually put yourself [out there] and choose politics…to become a leader, there will always a *hadith* or Al-Quran text pointed to you that: oh, you are not going to be a good leader because Islam said woman cannot be a leader…So, we are fighting against that narrative."

At times, women who are in leadership positions themselves reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. For instance, Nabilah from Wanita IKRAM pointed to a controversial campaign by a female minister who headed the Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development during Malaysia's COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The ministry's campaign aimed to address concerns about the rise of domestic violence cases during the lockdown, but it paradoxically placed the responsibility on women to promote "positive family relations" by not nagging at their husbands, dressing up and wearing make-up while working from home (Sullivan 2020). For Nabilah, leadership mattered because such patriarchal women-blaming messages from the those in top positions would "seep into the community." In this, Nabilah was expressing the same kinds of concerns over the internalisation of patriarchal beliefs by Malay women that Sofea from ARROW had articulated (see Chapter 6.4.1.3).

As this section has endeavoured to show, although the women are from different ideological groups, they share remarkably similar perspectives on the harms of gender stereotypes and resistance to sexist social structures and practices. Therefore, the argument here is that it is possible for the women activists to cultivate an understanding of women's shared struggle against sexist oppression. Frye's work on oppression highlighted three aspects of oppressive practices (Frye 1983 cited in Khader 2019) that the women activists would find agreement on: (1) membership to particular social group informs the type of oppressive practices that members are subjected to, i.e., women are oppressed as women (due to their female sex, women in Malaysia are uniquely disadvantaged based on dominant cultural and religious beliefs in specific ways that men are not); (2) oppressive practices are part of a network of forces that work together to systemically produce similar effects (male dominance and androcentrism in Malaysia tend to render women's concerns invisible or less important); (3) and one of those effects must be the subordination of the oppressed group (while women are revered as mothers and wives in Malaysia, as the women's perspectives in this section showed, they are

nonetheless subordinated to men, especially in public domains and leadership roles). A locally rooted feminism framed against sexist oppression will make it easier for the Malay women activists from the different ideological groups to build common ground.

8.2.2: Labels

Another pertinent intersection in the women's understandings was their rejection of the simplistic labelling of Muslim groups as 'liberal' or 'conservative', even though some women modified their actions over concerns of social stigmatisation. Chapter Five showed how the increasingly contentious racial politicking in Malaysia had contributed to the political and religious elites' construction of the pejorative understanding of the 'liberal' Muslim other as anti-Islam. The political and religious elites had leveraged key periods of socio-political uncertainty to reaffirm the *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) narrative and framed 'liberal' Malays as a threat by associating them with non-Malay ethnic minorities and, by extension, with secular values. Muslim reformist groups such as the Islamic feminist group SIS, which utilise feminist and human rights discourses within an Islamic framework to promote pro-democratic values such equality, inclusiveness, and religious pluralism, have been especially vulnerable to being labelled 'liberal'. After years of enduring such labelling in society, SIS was officially labelled 'liberal' and hence religiously 'deviant' through a 2014 *fatwa* (an Islamic ruling that is legally binding in Malaysia) by the Selangor Islamic department. Chapter 7.3 highlighted that the 'liberal' labelling did influence the previous generations of Islamic women activists to be prejudiced against SIS, which the current generation of Islamic women activists have had to work to overcome.

Concerns over social stigmatisation from association with individuals labelled as 'liberal' do still influence some of the Islamic women activists to modify their behaviours and choices in the course of their advocacy work. For example, Nur from Helwa ABIM noted that she appreciated the advocacy of Siti Kassim, a prominent Malay lawyer-activist, who worked on land rights for the *Orang Asli* (Indigenous peoples in Peninsula Malaysia). However, Nur also said she would not publicly endorse Siti as she was known to be a 'liberal' for her strident and controversial criticism of "Islamic men", the religious authorities and the Malay royalty.[83] Yet

[83] Not only is Siti Kasim labelled as 'liberal' by various Muslim groups and on social media, but she is also one of few Malay public figures in Malaysia to openly self-identify as a 'liberal' and in favour of secular governance (Kasim 2018).

Nur said she would privately refer to Siti's work on land rights to those Malays living in the rural estates who had similar questions over land rights issues. As Chapter Six had emphasised, the main tension between the women activists from the different ideological groups is over religious authority. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Nur would refrain from public support for Siti's work on land rights, even when she agreed with it, because Siti is also well-known in society for advocating secular governance and warning against the expansion of the Syariah law system in Malaysia. Siti's stance opposes the worldview of the Islamic revivalists, who instead aim to enhance the Syariah law system in Malaysia. So, while Nur chose not to openly associate with or support Siti, she did not do the same with SIS, which has been labelled as 'liberal'. Unlike Siti, SIS is not opposed to the Syariah law system but instead advocates for reforms on specific Syariah legislations that disadvantage women. Therefore, the anti-Islam pejorative meaning of 'liberal' Muslim is linked to the fears of some within the Islamic activist circles about the 'liberal' agenda of secular activists to undermine the religious authority of the Syariah law system in Malaysia (Chapter Five).

Spectrum of Ideological Viewpoints

Contrary to expectations, the women activists from the different groups were surprisingly reluctant to label others as 'liberal' or 'conservative'. Instead, they argued that the diversity of ideological viewpoints both within their own groups and in wider society proved that such labelling was not meaningful. Notably, the women activists from the secular multiracial groups stressed that Islamic women activists – often thought of in society as 'conservative' – could hold to feminist values.

> I've always myself struggled with, like, what would I consider conservative, what I would consider as liberal, and what is right, what is wrong. That's why I feel through my journey, what I've learned the most, is to never judge…I've come to the point where I've realised even conservatism has its own feminist values…I would just say…If something is against feminism, is this anti-feminism? It's not conservativism, it's not liberal. Like, even liberals could be anti-feminist, right – Hani, Dear Her

Hani from the secular multiracial group Dear Her avoided defining who constituted the 'liberal' or the 'conservative' because she believed that such labelling would only obscure the feminist actions of people. She explained that previously she had assumed that religiously conservative people (she meant the women in Islamic revivalist groups) could not hold feminist values, but through her activism journey she learned that this was not true. As Hani put it, "conservatism has its own feminist values" while some "liberals could be anti-feminist." By this, Hani recognised that 'liberal' secular women who insisted on a universalist approach to women's rights while inadequately considering intersecting factors such as religion, class, and race, could exclude the voices of other women (Castro 2021), which was anti-feminist. Instead of labelling individuals and groups, Hani looked at peoples' actions to determine if their actions were against feminist values or not. By doing so, Hani hoped to avoid the pitfalls of some secular feminists who regard religions as inherently patriarchal institutions that treat women as unequal to men and so were inclined to dismiss Muslim women in religious groups as working on goals antithetical to feminism (see the discussion in Chapter Three). Hani's reasoning here implicitly acknowledges that feminist actions could also occur discreetly and under the radar of the public eye, i.e., those infra-political acts, thoughts, and gestures that are not meant to be an overt form of political action (Scott 1990), but which could be located in the routines of everyday life of women (Lugones 2010). For example, the Helwa ABIM activist, Sarah's account of her group's inclusion of sex education in the curriculum at the shelter home for unwed and pregnant teenage girls, even though it is considered "sensitive' in Islamic revivalist circles (Chapter Seven). Labelling and its attendant cloak of prejudice would obscure such feminist-affirming actions.

Sofea from the secular multiracial group ARROW shared similar sentiments, arguing that 'liberal' and 'conservative' were merely two extreme ends along an ideological spectrum. For Sofea, the 'conservatives' at one extreme end were those who think that women "who don't wear the *tudung* [headscarf] deserve a spot in hell" while the 'liberals' at the other extreme end were those who think that religious people are "narrow-minded and shallow." Sofea stressed that most people in society would fall somewhere along the spectrum rather than at those two extreme ends. The potential for building the common ground lay with the majority along the spectrum rather than at the extreme ends.

As such, both Hani and Sofea rejected the simplistic labelling of Muslim individuals and groups as either 'liberal' or 'conservative'. In doing so, they were in effect rejecting the

politically motivated construction of 'liberal' as anti-Islam and at the same time rejecting the coloniality of secularism that imposes the idea that the cultivation of secular and liberal norms is central to upholding women's rights and freedoms (Miro´2020). Instead, they accepted that other Muslim women, who willingly support the mission of the Islamic revivalist groups, can also hold feminist values like themselves. Hani and Sofea then opposed the notion that is still prevalent in some secular activist circles that *inferior* Islamic norms and values are in continuous conflict with the *superior* secular and liberal norms and values (see Huntington 1996; Inglehart and Norris 2003).

Intra-Group Diversity

As discussed in Chapter 7.1, the Islamic women activists have had personal experiences with being labelled themselves. Nisa from Helwa ABIM noted that her group had been variously labelled as 'liberal', 'conservative' and 'moderate' by others: the group was 'liberal' for engaging with non-Muslims; 'conservative' for referencing religion and thus "not modern"; and 'moderate' for "not being extreme" in its advocacy positions. While Nisa said she preferred to be known as 'moderate', she also believed that these labels ultimately did not matter in defining the group because members actually held a diversity of viewpoints on social issues. For example, Nisa noted that women within her own Islamic group disagreed about the connection with dress and rape. Some in Nisa's group stressed that women should be responsible to dress modestly to protect themselves from rape while others argued that women are raped regardless of the type of dress they wore. The latter perspective is the same position held by Alya from the secular multiracial group Kryss Network who highlighted that making women responsible for dressing modestly to ward off rape is a form of victim-blaming. Therefore, although the women in Nisa's group were part of an Islamic revivalist group, some of them held views that were congruent with women from secular multiracial groups.

> In an organisation like Helwa ABIM, someone can choose to be traditional, someone can choose to be liberal, someone can choose to be secular, someone can choose to be feminist, but we are still in the same organisation…One set of mind is not common ground…One set of mind is…just exclusively thinking about ourselves – Nur, Helwa ABIM

Nur from Helwa ABIM stressed that the reality of intra-group diversity of viewpoints negated the idea that groups had to be always uniform in thought. Nur argued against the notion that group members should have "one set of mind", by which she meant that the members within a group should *not* have to hold onto the same set of ideas because that would make Helwa ABIM an exclusive group. Anis from Wanita IKRAM echoed similar sentiments. For Alia, being 'conservative' meant adherence to a set of fixed ideas. However, Alia argued that Wanita IKRAM is open to new and different perspectives despite holding on to key religious fundamentals. For Nur, the intra-group diversity of viewpoints within her group reflected the diversity in society. For Nur and Anis, the challenge then was to search for the common ground within this reality of diverse viewpoints both within their groups and in wider society. If they are searching for the common ground within their own groups, the argument here is that they can also do the same beyond their groups.

Nabilah from Wanita IKRAM provided a practical example of how the common ground on objectives could be built amid intra-group diversity of viewpoints. Nabilah and a few like-minded IKRAM members had wanted to organise a youth music festival to promote the message of social harmony among the different races in Malaysia. However, she noted that the older members within IKRAM were not keen on supporting the initiative because of the different interpretations about the permissibility of music in Islam – some Muslims within IKRAM interpretated music as *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. Music festivals were also generally associated with alcohol-drinking and free mixing between males and females, both of which are considered *haram* in Islam. Nabilah noted that some of the older generation activists within IKRAM were concerned that if the youth music festival was branded as an IKRAM initiative, the group would suffer a "backlash" from the more conservative Muslim groups in society; as Chapter 7 noted, IKRAM was labelled 'liberal' for its engagement with non-Muslims and non-Malays by other Muslim groups within the Islamic revivalist activism circles. On the other hand, there was also the concern that non-Muslims would not be keen to participate in a music festival organised by a Muslim group labelled in society as a 'conservative' Islamic revivalist group.

As a result, the IKRAM activists created a new youth group called Pertubuhan Pemuda GEMA Malaysia (GEMA) and the music festival (Spectrum Musica) was organised under the banner of this new group. The music festival (including a competition with bands vying for prizes) proved to be a success and it was repeated annually until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020.

Nabilah stressed that GEMA's success proved to the older activists in IKRAM that it was possible to promote the positive message of social harmony through music by uniting very different racial and youth groups in society, including heavy metal bands, in a controlled *halal* (permissible) environment where alcohol and drug use were prohibited. In this example, Nabilah and her fellow activists demonstrated that while opposing models of the moral world did exist in the minds of the Islamic activists, it was possible to move between the worlds and thus create something new that defied simplistic labelling as 'liberal' or 'conservative'. Nabilah remained just as invested in Wanita IKRAM as she was in the new GEMA initiative. The Islam that she held to then is a living, evolving and dynamic tradition rather than the essentialist, static, and fixed view of Islam that is a colonial-era and orientalist conception (Said 1978; Miro´ 2020). Since the Islamic women activists recognise intra-group diversity and are accustomed to working around it, there is potential for them to do so with the ideologically different women's groups too.

Resisting Labelling

Some of the women activists also attempt to defy the labelling assumptions of other women activists, which are based on outward identity markers such as type of clothing worn. For Muslim women, the *tudung* (headscarf) is a visible declaration of one's religious identity. Recent studies on the commodification of *tudung* have pointed to the interplay of religion, fashion trends, celebrity social media influencers, and the notions of high class and progressiveness on Malay women's *tudung*-wearing practices (Mohamed and Hassim 2021) suggesting that religious conservatism is not the sole factor in *tudung*-wearing. Yet, as pointed out by Sofea from ARROW, *tudung*-wearing Malay women are still closely associated with religious conservatism in the secular activism circles (see discussion in Chapter 7.2.2; Nisa 2018 on the neighbouring Indonesian context). Some of the Islamic women activists are aware of such dominant perceptions, and they attempt to resist it.

> They label me as Helwa ABIM because of what I wear – they just label me. Like, I come in the room, and they'll be just like: oh, this is an Islamist coming into the room. So, the first thing that comes out from my mouth is: I am a liberal and secular and that can actually help to break the barrier – Nur, Helwa ABIM

Nur believed that women activists from other ideological groups categorised her as an "Islamist" because of her Islamic clothing when they encountered her in joint-engagement activities.[84] Nur's solution was to shatter any pre-conceived notions that someone may have of her views based on her outward appearance by declaring that she was a 'liberal' and 'secular.' In this manner, she hoped to surprise others into paying closer attention to her views. Similarly, Umairah from SIS attempted to shatter the notion that purportedly 'conservative' *tudung*-wearing women such as herself would not associate with SIS because SIS has been labelled as 'liberal'.

> *Sebenarnya, memang sudah dapat instinct yang makcik ini memang sangat judgemental lah* [Actually, I had an instinct that this aunty was very judgemental]. *Macam, why would this girl yang pakai tudung properly, pakai jubaah, kerja dekat SIS* [Like, why would this girl who wears *tudung* properly, wears the long robe, work with SIS] – Umairah, SIS

Umairah recounted that SIS had invited Wanita IKRAM activists to dinner function. At the dinner, she sat next to an older Islamic women activist.[85] Umairah believed that the Islamic women activist at first had judged her negatively for choosing to work with SIS even though she (unlike most SIS activists) was clad in Islamic clothing such as long robes and the *tudung*. As such, Umairah made the effort to impress the older Islamic woman activist by weaving into their conversation her knowledge of Islamic Studies and information on the engagement activities SIS had with the *ulama* (religious teachers). By doing so, Umairah hoped to dispel the misconception that SIS activists lacked solid grounding in Islamic Studies. Although from different ideological groups, both Nur and Umairah then had similar experiences where they resented and resisted being labelled. They each sought to dispel the assumptions about them in an effort to form a connection with the other party.

[84] The term "Islamist" has acquired a negative connotation in world politics because it has been conflated with the 'Islamic state' narrative from terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Most Islamists though are not violent extremists even as they advocate for Islamic influence in state and society (Hamid 2015). In Malaysia, "democracy went hand in hand with Islamization", meaning most of the population wanted the implementation of Islamised policies and legislations (Hamid 2015). However, as Chapter Five had argued, the conditions of ethnic politics and religious nationalism exacerbates polarisation along secular and religious lines, which contributes to the distrust towards Islamic revivalist groups by racial minorities and non-mainstream Muslim groups. Nur's account here demonstrates her awareness of the polarised Malaysian context.

[85] Umairah used the term *makcik* (aunty) which is a colloquial reference for older woman.

8.2.3: Polarising Politics

Another pertinent intersection between the women activists was their lack of trust in politicians to solve social issues. One of the key challenges that complicate the building of a common ground between the different women's groups has been polarising politics. As Chapter One and Five highlighted, polarising perceptions of threat in civil society were particularly heightened during the contentious religious freedom court cases in the 2000s – secular-oriented multiracial groups had feared the erosion of the secular nature of the federal constitution and individual rights, while Islamic groups had feared the erosion of the Syariah system's sovereignty and Muslim community rights, and both sides sought to defend their respective positions in a zero-sum manner (Moustafa 2018). Chapter Five showed that this period was crucial in framing 'liberal' Muslims as a threat by associating them with non-Malay minorities and, by extension, with secular values. The women's groups took on oppositional stances during this period. Political polarisation has only further deepened along racial lines since the 2018 General Elections; then, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition, which had governed the country uninterruptedly since 1957, suffered a shocking defeat at the hands of Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. Intense politicking since then saw changes of government with four different prime ministers over a span of 5 years.

The deepening political polarisation along racial lines became starkly evident in the recent 2022 General Elections. Election analysis indicated that non-Malays overwhelmingly supported PH with support from 94% of Chinese voters and 83% of Indian voters while the Malay vote was split among the three main coalitions with two Malay-centric coalitions, Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN) and BN, garnering 54% and 33% of the Malay vote respectively, and PH 11% (Welsh 2022). Notably, the hard-line Islamist party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS), known to push for *hudud* implementation in the Syariah law system (i.e., harsh punishments such as flogging, amputation, and death for religious crimes), more than doubled its parliamentary seats in the 2022 General Elections.[86] In a context of pronounced political instability and recent revelations on corruption cases, for a number of Malays, trust is likely more easily conferred upon politicians perceived to be religious (Saleem 2023).[87] Religious politicians are believed to hold themselves accountable to

[86] In fact, PAS won the largest number of parliamentary seats (49) followed by the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) with 40 seats; DAP is a component party in the PH coalition.
[87] For example, the 1MDB corruption scandal is one of the key factors that contributed to the UMNO-led government's downfall in 2018 (Funston 2018).

a higher divine power and hence less likely to engage in corrupt activities, a phenomenon in Muslim-majority countries referred to as the "Islamist advantage" (Cammett and Luong 2014). This type of belief, where trust and respect are conferred upon religious teachers, is cultivated in the network of Islamic schools run by PAS in its rural strongholds and in some urban areas habited by Malays (Hamid and Razali 2022). Notably, in the 2022 General Elections, PAS made inroads into some urban areas suggesting that the religious credentials of PAS politicians, many of whom were religious teachers appealed not only to rural Malay voters but also to urban Malay voters. As such, the conditions for women activists to be distrustful of each other are not only embedded in the ideological differences of the women's groups and their history of oppositional ideological stances, but also in the polarised political context where race and religion are instrumentalised by politicians for political gains.

Yet despite their history of oppositional ideological stances, the women activists share a keen awareness of racial and religious issues being manipulated by unscrupulous politicians. The Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM are frustrated that the good image of Islam and Muslims are tarnished by such politicians. As Chapter Seven had highlighted, they are motivated to engage with non-Muslims to propagate the "right" values of Islam, with inclusivity rather than exclusivity being an overarching value. Alia from Wanita IKRAM lamented that her group had a difficult time convincing other Malays, who held to racist and discriminatory beliefs, to be more willing to work with non-Malays. She blamed this situation on the politicians who played on Malay fears of losing their special privileges. Alia's concerns about the societal impact of politicians' use of race and religion as political tools are also echoed by the women from SIS and the secular multiracial groups. For instance, Aina from SIS noted that polarising racial politics coupled with the politicisation of Islam had resulted in Malays being overly judgemental about any perceived threat to their Malay and Muslim identities. Minor issues are magnified as culture wars in society by politicians and religious authorities, which Aina argued contribute to Malays' closed mindset.

Several culture war controversies that pointed to the women's concerns about Malay fears and closed mindset occurred during the research period for this thesis. One involved the issue of permissibility of alcohol sales in Muslim-majority Malaysia. The issue was triggered after a Malaysian alcoholic beverage manufacturer renamed its whisky brand to 'Timah' in 2021. The manufacturer was accused of being disrespectful to Muslims by the PAS president Hadi Awang and the Penang *mufti* (chief Islamic scholar). According to them, 'Timah' could be

misconstrued as a reference to Fatimah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. The manufacturer's explanation that 'Timah' was the Malay word for tin, which referenced the tin mining era of British Malaya, was not accepted.[88] This controversy ignited attempts by more conservative Muslim groups to advocate against open alcohol sales in Malaysia, with one male activist from Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) forcibly preventing a female Malay cashier from making an alcohol sale (Alatas and Ridzuan 2021). Such politicised incidents not only contribute to a Muslim religious conservatism turn in Malaysia (Abdul Hamid and Ismail 2014) but also keep reproducing a divide between Malays and non-Malays that the women activists from the different ideological groups see as concerning.[89] The lingering effect of these culture war controversies that are hyped up by politicians is the siege mentality where both the Malays and non-Malays believe they are under attack for their values and worldviews.

> "We don't have that trust anymore that the politicians will solve our problems, especially on these social issues…we must struggle to be always in the middle." – Aisyah, Helwa ABIM

The conditions of polarising politics and the recent political instability have arguably contributed to a lack of trust in politicians among the women activists. The view from Aisyah from Helwa ABIM on not trusting politicians "to solve our problems, especially on these social issues" best summed up the sentiments expressed by the women activists. Anis from Wanita IKRAM recounted how she witnessed "vote-buying" tactics from a Malay political party during an IKRAM-organised Ramadan *buka puasa* (breaking of fast) event – charity hand-outs were to be given to the needy people living in the district during the event. However, politicians from the Malay party came to the event with their own list of supporters living in the district. Anis highlighted that the supporters on the party's list and not the genuinely needy people ended up receiving the hand-outs. Therefore, despite the women's ideological differences, the argument here is that the shared sentiment among them that politicians are not to be trusted to solve social problems can motivate them to build a common ground and to be more conscious

[88] Although this controversy was hyped up in the media with various public figures commenting on the case, the brand later retained its 'Timah' name.

[89] Another recent example of how such ethnoreligious divisions is manufactured is the PAS youth group's military-style parade where its members dressed in clothing reminiscent of the Ottoman-era and armed themselves with spears and shields. Critics accused PAS of using similar optics as the white supremacist group Ku Klux Klan in the US and the right-wing Hindutva group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India to ferment fear among the non-Muslim minorities in Malaysia (Azmi 2023).

not to fall into the same kinds of oppositional stances that characterised culture war clashes in the past – as Aisyah puts it, women would have to "struggle to be always in the middle."

However, as Nur from Helwa ABIM highlighted in the previous section on labelling, there is a tendency within secular activist circles to lump those who advocate for Islamic values in society and governance as "Islamists"; this tendency implicitly categorises groups like Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM with Muslim conservative groups like ISMA and the Islamist political party PAS as of the same kind. However, the Islamic women activists do not see themselves necessarily sharing the same ideological worldviews with groups like ISMA and PAS. Putri from Helwa ABIM argued that her group often struggled to engage with the women from PAS because of their closed "attitude." Putri argued that PAS women stuck to their understanding of Islam and dismissed other equally possible and valid understandings. Instead, Putri found it easier to engage with the SIS activists, even though they do not always agree on issues, because SIS activists are more "open" to different interpretations and respectful of differences. In contrast to the more 'conservative' social and political groups then, the women activists from the different ideological groups can build deeper relations of trust over their shared concerns and the moral imperative to mitigate the dire conditions of polarising politics in Malaysia.

8.3: Building Relations of Trust

This chapter argues that the three intersections in understandings identified from the women's narrations of their experiences – their shared frustrations and resistance to sexist oppression; labelling; and toxic polarised politics – constitute key broad areas where the women activists can build the common ground to strengthen the relations of trust between them. Chapter Seven argued that the women's own experiences helped to establish a modicum of trust in the expected good will of women activists from other groups, which facilitated the recent inter-group engagements. The inter-group engagement promoted social learning and agreement in areas such as sexual harassment and child marriage, as well as brought up disagreement over *khitan* (female circumcision). From the women's accounts, it is evident that the inter-group engagements thus far occur on an issue-basis (meaning they tend to come together to discuss specific issues). The engagements on an issue-basis can be helpful in promoting greater

understanding of each other's respective positions but may not necessarily strengthen the bonds of moralistic trust between the women.

However, moralistic trust – where the women recognise that they share moral values as members of a wider community of Malay and Muslim women – could be forged by cultivating more self-awareness of the broad areas in which they already share remarkably similar understandings and experiences of resisting sexism, labelling and toxic politics. The similarities in their thinking on these broad topics was a surprising finding, given the polarising culture wars context that was discussed in the earlier chapters. The finding highlights that there can be some common grounds on which to bridge ideological divides, even in contexts where ideological differences are often perceived by both sides as non-negotiable. This is a unique perspective that offers a more optimistic view on efforts at unity and trust building rather than the dismal view that culture war differences are inevitable and a new normal in our increasingly plural societies.

The informal ways in which some of the women attempt to connect with other women activists could already be helping to cultivate moralistic trust that opens for unity building. For example, Najwa from SIS highlighted that she added several Helwa ABIM activists as "friends" to her Facebook account. Najwa made it a point to like and comment on the posts by the Helwa ABIM activists to signal her support and agreement when they posted something in their own Facebook accounts that resonated with her: "social media accord me a platform to be able to tell people that…I like it [other women's opinions] enough to also then repost it on my [Facebook] wall because I think these are the things that I would say myself about this particular issue." Even though, Najwa interacts in this manner only with specific individuals within Helwa ABIM and not at an organisational level, she believes that such gestures function as "*pembuka pintu*" [door openers] that helps to cultivate an awareness that they share common understandings. Another way is through inviting the women from other groups to speak on one's platforms. Najwa invited some of the Helwa ABIM activists to speak on Telenisa Tells, an online live discussion session broadcasted on social media platforms. While the Helwa ABIM activists did not use their group's branding and spoke in their personal capacity, Najwa stressed that Helwa ABIM's large followers nevertheless knew who they were. These informal connections help to signal mutual recognition of each other that help to promote trust between different groups (Sztompka 2016).

However, the women also highlighted that there were practical challenges that could hinder the building of trust between the women's groups. Hani from the secular multiracial group, Dear Her, noted that the "privileged" position of activists in secular circles such as language preferences could alienate other more religiously 'conservative' women in society: "a lot of us use the English language, we prefer, and we are more comfortable with talking and discussing in the English language." Hani recognised that the Islamic women activists largely engaged amongst themselves and with their grassroots in the Malay language and pointed out that the secular groups' educational materials put out in social media would not be easily accessible to a majority in society. Furthermore, there is a tendency for secular groups to focus on feminist arguments that are secularised or Western-centric which would be rejected by some Islamic women activists. Hani argued that there was a need for "refreshing the image of feminism to show that it is in line with Malaysia" by using local languages like Malay to make more explicit the areas of agreement between different ideological groups. Alya from the secular multiracial group, Kryss Network, noted that there were differences that would not always be easy to bridge – for Alya, the belief held by some Islamic women activists that women should be responsible to dress modestly to prevent rape is a form of victim-blaming. Nevertheless, Alya suggested that trust could gradually be built by adopting an "activism of kindness and empathy" in an attempt to understand the perspective of the other. By doing so, Alya wished to communicate to other women, through her practice of "kindness and empathy", the value of putting oneself into the position of another. Alya surmised that if the Islamic women activists could reciprocate by thinking from a place of "kindness and empathy", they would see that most female rape victims were victimised by those known and trusted, and not strangers.

8.4: Toward a Decolonial Muslim Feminism

Feminism has long been perceived as alien to Malaysian culture (Ariffin 1999). This societal perception was reinforced through political discourse such as the Asian values debates led by the leaders of Singapore and Malaysia during the 1990s (Lee 2018). The former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamed, who steered the country's development trajectory for 22 long years, held significant influence in Malaysian society and politics during that period. Mahathir was instrumental in painting the women's liberation movement as an unwanted Western ill that had contributed to the corruption of Western societies (Lee 2018). The effect of his negative portrayal of feminism as a Western ill, coupled with the growth of the Islamic revivalist

movement, was the de-legitimatisation of feminism as a valid framework to pursue women's rights. As Chapter Two highlighted, the different women's groups evolved separately with distinctive ideological orientations. Notably, the Islamic women activists held separate positions from the secular feminists and Islamic feminists on several issues. For example, the Islamic women activists had opposed the Domestic Violence Bill that was initiated by the secular feminist lobby in 1994, with a watered-down bill later being passed (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). Even though the bill passed, the Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM were still unhappy that the bill did not differentiate "the legal jurisdiction of Muslim women from that of non-Muslim women" (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 100). What bothered them was the idea that Muslim women and family matters were being governed by civil law when Syariah law held the legitimate jurisdiction over such matters (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006). The Islamic women activists had also objected to terms such as "domestic violence" and "violence against women", preferring instead "family violence" (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 100). As such, Malay women remained divided "between 'Islamized' women and others (including non-Muslims)" (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006, p. 23). As Chapter Six showed, the tension over religious authority (Syariah legal system) continue to be a barrier to building trust between ideologically different Muslim women's groups because their advocacy is ultimately underpinned by different imperatives – one side seeks to maintain the legitimacy and credibility of the established religious authority while the other side seeks to check, apply pressure for reforms, and hold religious authority to public account instead.

However, as Chapter Seven and this chapter demonstrates, the understanding of feminism as alien to Malaysian culture is clearly changing. Contrary to expectation, several of the younger Islamic women activists in this research saw no contradiction in identifying as "Muslims" and "feminists", sharing similar perspectives with the younger women from the secular multiracial groups. And unlike the Islamic women activists from the 1990s who objected to specific terms used by secular feminists (Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006), all the Islamic women activists in this research used the same terms as the women from the secular multiracial and Islamic feminist groups in describing issues faced by women in Malaysia; the Islamic women activists in this research had no issue using terms such sexual harassment, domestic violence, and violence against women compared to their counterparts in 1994. What has changed in the nearly 30-year period between then and now? Part of it may be due to the increasing number of Malay women in higher education and in professional careers, who are marking their space in the public sphere. For example, more women may become aware of sexist structures once they are

forced to confront unfair discriminatory practices that are rationalised based on gender stereotypes and resonate with feminist principles. However, the Islamic revivalist groups had attracted educated and professional women then as they do now. A more compelling factor argued in Chapter Seven is that the women's *own* experiences in the course of their advocacy work made them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. The argument here is that the women's experiences of having to step outside of their own social worlds to navigate diverse and complex situations helped to blur the divide between "Islamised women" and others, which had previously characterised women's activism in Malaysia. They were able to cross the ideological divide into other social worlds despite having knowledge of the ideological differences and past experiences of being on oppositional sides.

Therein lies the prospects for an emergence of a locally rooted and cross cutting decolonial Muslim feminism in Malaysia. As this thesis has highlighted, Malaysia is an immigrant society fraught with inter-ethnic tensions that socially and politically divide Malays too. Malay ultra-nationalists who claim indigeneity accuse 'liberal' Muslims of being in cahoots with non-Malay minorities to undermine the position of Malays and Islam in Malaysia. In such a toxic political climate, paradoxically, even the Malay women activists from Islamic revivalist groups have been labelled 'liberal' for engaging in inter-faith activities with non-Malays. Despite having roots in Malaysia for many generations, non-Malays (especially the Chinese minority group) are continually depicted in political rhetoric as *pendatang* (foreigners) in order to exclude them from the Malaysian polity. Therefore, the racial hierarchical difference that was imposed and harnessed by the British colonisers for their capitalist pursuits is constantly being reproduced and updated by those Malays who wish to maintain racial hierarchies for political gains. Furthermore, when secular groups focus on feminist arguments that are secularised or Western-centric, they risk inadvertently reinscribing the coloniality of secularism that alienates women from the Islamic revivalist groups.

In the Malaysian context then, a decolonial Muslim feminism is a productive way to reject the toxic ethnic politics that have divided Malaysians along racial and religious lines and recognise the reality of a plural Malaysia. A decolonial Muslim feminism would also be more inclusive compared to Islamic feminism because it would better accommodate Muslim women who are

more secular yet embrace a Muslim identify.[90] A decolonial Muslim feminism that unites the different ideological groups Malay women groups will also more likely be able to find common ground with the non-Malay feminists living within their midst. To that end, Wee and Shaheed defines feminism(s) that are locally rooted as "women's endeavours of asserting their rights in their own socio-cultural context" (Wee and Shaheed 2016 cited in Lee 2018, p. 17). These endeavours can be actualised in multiple and varied ways yet similarly aimed at undoing the oppressive structures targeted at women. Instead of insisting on universalist norms and values that are in reality based on Western secular and liberal traditions, these endeavours "must always take into account the web of indigenous norms and values of female role and agency" (Ong 2011, p. 29). Indigenous norms and values in this respect are those that are locally rooted, and as this thesis has argued, norms and values are constantly being mediated in the liminal spaces between the social worlds that the women cross in the course of their work. The way forward for women from different ideological groups would be to cross ideological divides to engage with each other's "traditions and practices and the arguments for women's emancipation they furnish" (Khader 2019, p. 16).

One starting point to cultivate a decolonial Muslim feminism would be engagement in areas where there are already intersections in understandings. This chapter showed that the women share remarkably similar understandings and experiences of resistance to sexist oppression, labelling, and polarised politics. These can constitute key broad areas where the women can locate the common ground to build and strengthen the relations of moralistic trust between them. Their shared experiences of – (1) forced subordination due to their female sex and dominant gender stereotypes; (2) the simplistic labelling in society that attempt to box them into essentialist, static, and fixed categories that negates the reality of ideological diversity within their own groups and in wider society; and (3) the awareness that politicians cannot be always trusted to solve social problems – can cultivate the shared belief that one's own fate is connected to the fate of others in the wider community of Malay and Muslim women. Since the women typically engage each other over specific social issues such as child marriage and *khitan* (female circumcision), these broader areas of social issues (sexism, labels, and impact of toxic politics) are seldom topics for discussion. The findings in this chapter though suggest that women would likely be better able to connect – i.e., develop moralistic trust – when the

[90] Islamic feminism's heavy focus on Islamic legalistic and theological arguments may not appeal to the more secular leaning Muslim women.

women can recognise that they stand on the same side in these broader societal issues, which will better help them avoid getting trapped in unproductive ideological debates. In this sense, moralistic trust between the Malay women acts as a necessary precursor that smoothens cooperation and compromise in other specific areas (for e.g., issues that intersect gender and Islamic law) that would be more complicated.

8.5: Conclusion

This chapter argued that the women activists can foster stronger relations of trust when they can recognise that the intersections in their understandings come from their shared challenges and experiences as fellow Malay and Muslim women. These deeper relations of trust across the ideological group divides would help the women activists to move past the particularised trust based on similar worldviews that the women activists share with their fellow group members. The challenge of cultivating a cross cutting decolonial Muslim feminism though is that "distrust is harder to unlearn when conditions change to justify trust, than is trust when conditions change to justify distrust" (Hardin 2002, p. 107). In other words, once there has been distrust between the Malay women's groups, it would be much easier to revert to preconceived and prejudicial perceptions of the other groups even when the conditions for the distrust are no longer relevant. For example, the threat perception of other women's groups working to undermine religious authority could be triggered by polarising toxic politics and cause some Islamic women activists to avoid engagement with these women's groups, or even worse take on oppositional public stances that contribute to polarising politics. Secular and Islamic feminists could likewise be triggered to do the same with the Islamic women's groups, contributing to polarising politics too. Furthermore, the women are continually subject to dominant social and political divisive forces stemming from ethnic politics and religious nationalism that attempt to constrain their actions and choices. There is no simple solution to overcoming such problems except to brave more movement across the ideological divides. As Aisyah from Helwa ABIM put it: "it's really a struggle, but I learned how to raise my voice, to be stubborn in certain things, to be courageous enough to do what I want to do." The women from the different groups have already braved the experiences that required them to step outside of their own social worlds and make pragmatic choices, so the prospects for continued movement despite the persisting challenges are indeed positive. The next chapter discusses the significance of the main findings, the original contributions of this thesis, and areas for future research.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

9.1: Significance of Main Findings

The research study for this thesis set out to investigate the prospects for the different Malay women groups to build trust and form cross cutting feminist solidarity despite their ideological differences and a history of being on oppositional sides. Through the study's findings, this thesis aimed to contribute to research knowledge on mitigating polarisation. Specifically, on the question of trust building between ideologically different social groups as means to help mitigate polarisation. Culture wars, defined by the American sociologist, Hunter, as conflicts rooted in perceptions of opposing worldviews informed by different morals, values, and beliefs (1991), are arguably on the rise in different parts of the world. Recent scholarly work on the issue of polarisation in contemporary societies indicate that culture wars drive affective polarisation in politics, that is, the deep distrust and dislike of other political parties and their supporters that is fuelled by growing polarising social identity divides across racial, religious, and cultural lines (Mason 2018; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Iyengar et al 2012). Distrust shaped by negative beliefs about others is problematic because such beliefs about others tend to affect one's perception of social reality, with the risk of becoming self-fulfilling (Govier 1997). A recent study (Lee 2022) confirms that societal perceptions about growing polarisation makes people less trusting of each other, which in turn decreases their willingness to cooperate toward common goals. These are issues with adverse implications for social cohesion and good governance outcomes. Prior research focused on promoting inter-group contact through voluntary associations or through concerted policy initiatives as means to reduce polarisation and prejudiced beliefs and improve social trust (Paluck, Green and Green 2019; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Putnam 2000). The problem is that in practice people tend to self-sort into homogenous groups based on ethnicity, religion or ideology and this tendency foster particularised trust with those like themselves rather than generalised social trust in those different from themselves (Zmerli and Newton 2007; Yamagishi 1994). Encouraging contact when there are already perceptions of negative experiences with other groups has also been shown to increase rather than reduce prejudiced beliefs (Barlow et al 2012). Furthermore, it is not clear what oppositional groups should speak about when they are brought together to

interact at the same table with the hope for depolarisation? Speaking about topics that both groups perceive as non-negotiable could entrench their opposing positions instead.

The thesis contributes to these ongoing academic research and debates on solutions to mitigate polarisation and locate avenues for trust building between different social groups. Based on the main findings in this thesis, it is argued that one possible way to mitigate polarisation is to cultivate and strengthen the relations of moralistic trust between different ideological groups by (1) first locating the existing intersections in their understandings on societal issues (2) and second encouraging inter-group interactions on those issues because it will be easier for people to form relations of moralistic trust on areas they are already inclined to agree on. Strengthened relations of moralistic trust will help smoothen compromise and cooperation in other more difficult areas. Those who hold moralistic trust are more willing to consider others, even those who may not carry the same ideological beliefs or policy opinions as themselves, as part of a shared wider community (Uslaner 2002). When different ideological groups can more easily recognise that they stand on the same side on some issues, it will be easier for them to trust that others will not let them down because their mutual well-being and fate are connected as fellow members in a shared wider community. This concluding chapter discusses the significance of the main findings from the study of the Malay women's groups in Malaysia, the original contributions of the thesis, and the areas for future research.

Malay Women's Groups and Mitigating Polarisation in Malaysia

In the post-Reformasi context (from 1998 onwards), political struggles between Malay political elites from UMNO and the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition of secular multiracial, Malay, and Islamist political parties created reasons for Malay women from secular and Islamic revivalist women's civil society groups to pragmatically work together to support the opposition coalition's push for governmental reforms. Malay women from secular and Islamic revivalist groups had opportunities to encounter and work with each other within this context on joint campaigns such as the Bersih (Clean) anti-corruption campaign (Ng, Mohamad, and Tan 2006). Yet despite these encounters, Malay women activists adopted oppositional stances during the civil society clashes over the religious freedom cases in the 2000s. During this period, an umbrella group of more than 70 Muslim civil society organisations called the Defenders of Islam (*Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Pembela Islam*, PEMBELA), which included ABIM and IKRAM, was formed specifically to oppose secular-oriented civil society groups.

Threat perceptions on both sides of the divide were heightened – secular-oriented groups led mostly by non-Malays and some Malays and Muslims feared that individual rights guaranteed under the Malaysian constitutional were under serious threat while Islamic groups led by Malays claimed their community rights to govern their own religious communities were under threat (Moustafa 2018). These threat perceptions get re-evoked each time a culture war issue (typically related to ethno-religious differences and Islam) grabs public attention through posturing and fearmongering by the different political parties jockeying for voter support and through media hype, which reinforce the societal perception of irreconcilable differences that are rooted in ostensibly non-intersecting spheres of the sacred and the secular. The study for this thesis focuses on understanding whether it would be possible to build relations of trust between Malay women from the secular multiracial, Islamic feminist and Islamic revivalist groups in this context of polarising ethnic politics, religious nationalism, and culture wars.

Chapter Two shows the historical differentiation of the main ideological orientations of Malay women's groups that today contribute to the national discourse on Islam and Muslim women in Malaysia, which are secular multiracial feminism, Islamic revivalism, and Islamic feminism. The women's groups are mapped according to their ideological orientations. Chapter Five shows that in addition to divisive forces driven by ideological beliefs of women's groups, the role of identity politics in the sectarianisation of 'liberal' Muslim Other also compound the problem of threat perception in Malay women's activism. The ideological divergence of the different women's groups becomes more pronounced in a context complicated by toxic ethnic politics, the politicisation of Islam, and polarising culture wars.

To help illuminate an answer to the overarching question guiding the research – i.e., whether the different Malay women groups can build trust to form cross cutting feminist solidarity despite their ideological differences and a history of being on oppositional sides – the study formulated specific research questions that are addressed with the empirical findings discussed in Chapters Six to Eight.

How do Malay women activists perceive other women activists from groups that are ideologically different from their own group?

The findings from Chapter Six show that the Malay women perceive themselves differently from other Malay women activists based on the ideological orientations of their groups. The

Islamic women activists from the Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM, who advocate for the centrality of Islamic values in society, tend to place trust in the Syariah legal system to uphold justice in matters pertaining to the religious lives of Muslims. On the other hand, the Malay women from the Islamic feminist group, SIS, and the secular multiracial groups adopt a more openly critical view of the Syariah legal system because they believe that male biases within the system prevent it from being more responsive to societal changes, which in turn contributes to gender injustice that adversely affects women. Hence, the SIS activists and the Malay women from the secular multiracial groups are quick to identify examples of unjust outcomes from Islamic laws and Syariah judgments that had negatively affected Malay women and non-Muslim minorities. The Islamic women activists though provide examples about progressive improvements in the Syariah system that according to them are more "women-friendly." They are more optimistic about the continued efforts at professionalising the state-level Syariah judges and the standardisation of religious interpretations through higher training initiatives by the federal religious agencies.

This attitudinal difference to the Syariah system between the women is shaped by their respective ideological worldviews. SIS activists believe in their (and Muslim women's) moral authority to intervene and comment on religious interpretations that negatively impact the rights of women while the Islamic women activists from Helwa ABIM and Wanita IKRAM believe that only officers who are formally trained in Islamic Sciences within the Syariah system – i.e., the *mufti* (chief Islamic scholar), *ulama* (religious scholars), and the *qadi* (Syariah judge) – have the legitimate authority to determine religious interpretations. Therefore, the Islamic women activists perceive SIS activists as untrained laypersons who sometimes go beyond the bounds of acceptable discourse on Islamic matters. SIS activists perceive the Islamic women activists as being unable to challenge the authority of the *ulama* and the *ustaz* (religious teachers) on harmful *fatwas* because the Islamic women activists had been socialised to equate the questioning of authority as undermining Islam itself. The Malay women from secular multiracial groups perceive SIS activists as charting a necessary "radical" path in Malaysian activism, since in their own work they tend to avoid speaking on religion. The attitudinal difference shapes the women's mode of engagement with the religious authorities. SIS adopts a more oppositional and emboldened manner of engagement with religious authorities as they see their role as correcting male biases in institutionalised Islam. The Islamic women activists tend to prefer closed-door dialogue over sensitive issues like child marriage and female circumcision, and rarely adopt oppositional positions openly in the public sphere.

As such, the Malay women in this research perceive themselves as distinctly different especially when they speak about legalistic issues such as *wali* (male guardianship) and specific Syariah laws on women – for example, where SIS sees inequality in the Islamic inheritance laws for women, the Islamic women activists see the Islamic *hikmah* (rationale) in the inequality as men's God-given duty to protect and support women financially. Their different attitudes and beliefs over religious authority then promotes in-group and out-group dynamics that foment preconceived and prejudicial views – for example, some of the women from the secular multiracial groups perceive that the Islamic women activists reinforce patriarchy because they lack the gender lens necessary to recognise the harms from gendered *fatwas* while some of the Islamic women activists perceive SIS activists as too provocative and acting against Malay "soft" culture. Such perceptions of each other as being fundamentally different can hinder the building of trust between the different women's groups.

The significance of the finding in Chapter Six is that the women's different beliefs over the Syariah legal system would likely centre in threat perceptions – for example, in situations where Islamic women activists perceive that other women's groups are working to delegitimise the Syariah system and where the secular and Islamic feminists perceive unfair encroachments to women's and minority groups' individual rights, as had previously happened during the religious freedom public contestations and which constitute the undercurrent of culture wars today. However, as the main findings from Chapter Seven also show, while the women perceive themselves as fundamentally different by virtue of their ideological worldviews, their own experiences in the course of their advocacy work makes them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. The significance of this finding from Chapter Seven is elaborated below.

In what ways, if any, do knowledge of other Malay women activists' positions on social issues impact one's own understanding?

As the findings from Chapter Six on the tensions between the women's groups showed, the women were well aware of the ideological differences between them that shapes the different groups' positions on some social issues. For example, the analysis in Chapter Six shows that the women understand each other's positions on gender roles and depending on their ideological worldviews, they either defend the idea of gender equality or gender complementarity in opposition to the other's worldviews. They also are aware of each other's

positioning and the differences between them on recent hot-button issues like female circumcision. It is only through the discussion of their personal experiences in their advocacy work that one of the most significant findings in this research was uncovered – i.e., despite being from different ideological groups, some of the women from Islamic revivalist groups adopt similar stances with secular and Islamic feminists on controversial issues like teenage pregnancies, sex education and contraception, and early marriage; and contrary to expectations, several younger women from the Islamic revivalist groups see no contradiction in identifying as "Muslims" and "feminists", sharing remarkably similar perspectives with the younger women from secular groups.

One possible explanation for this finding could be that the women are influenced by exposure to other women's positions. However, the women emphasise their *own* experiences as they sought to explain their thinking behind their positions on controversial topics. They do not reference positions from other women's groups even if they signal awareness of other groups' positions. So, they are not influenced to change or reflect on their own positions by the mere exposure to knowledge of other women's positions. In other words, the women's thoughts on social issues are not impacted by their knowledge of the other women's arguments on those same issues, which is a finding consistent with research on the group polarisation phenomenon. Since advocacy groups like the Malay women's groups tend to be ideologically homogenous, views exchanged internally within one's own groups tend to become more entrenched and resistant to change. The entrenchment of group views can occur in two ways (1) through exposure to other group members' views via social comparison processes, i.e., the tendency to compare one's initial position with other fellow members and to adjust one's views in accordance with others or to even more extreme positions and (2) discussion with like-minded group members via persuasive argumentations provides convincing reasons to retain one's views (Isenberg 1986; Sieber and Ziegler 2019). Furthermore, perceptions of group divisions and polarisation makes people less trusting of others (Lee 2022), which makes it less likely for one group to trust in the validity and reasonableness of another group's arguments.

Instead of being influenced to change their perceptions through knowledge of other women's positions, Chapter Seven argues that it was the women's *own* personal experiences in the course of their advocacy work that makes them more willing to set aside their preconceived and prejudiced beliefs about other groups. Key concepts rooted in decolonial feminism discussed in Chapter Three – world-travelling; borderlands as cultural spaces; colonial

difference – explains the realities of the women navigating complex as well as new situations, which requires them to step outside of their comfort zone to engage with or confront different perspectives and experiences that cannot always be categorised neatly into ideological worldviews. Consequently, some of the Islamic women activists are more reflective of their personal experiences of being labelled 'liberal' by other more conservative Malay groups as well as developed an awareness of their own group's limitations in engaging with the tangible aspects of social issues such as the mistreatment of the LGBT community. The Helwa ABIM activists' pragmatic positions on sex education and early marriages in the running of the shelter home for unwed pregnant teenage girls are also shaped by their own experiences with the girls they sought to help. The younger women activists (in their 20s to early 30s) from the secular multiracial and Islamic revivalist groups, who encounter prejudiced views against other groups within their own activist circles, resist the demarcation between Islam and feminism by declaring themselves to be both Muslim and feminist. So, rather than perceive other Malay women's groups as potential threats, the women are inclined to believe that good could emerge through the plurality of Muslim voices. Therefore, the women's own experiences contributed to a shift away from prejudicial perceptions about the other women's groups – i.e., these changing perceptions of each other function as the loosening of the "knot of distrust" (Kramer 2004, p. 150). The women's personal experiences then enable them to implicitly acknowledge common experiences and similar thinking that they share with other women activists over some social issues such as racial and gender biases and teenage pregnancies and early marriages. Their experiences help to establish a modicum of trust in the expected good will of women activists from other groups, which facilitates the recent inter-group engagements and opportunities for social learning.

The significance of this finding is the counterintuitive understanding that the context and conditions of polarisation in plural societies – at least in the world of advocacy and activism – may require activists to unwittingly move across ideological divides, and in doing so, be able to shed some of prejudiced perceptions of other groups. So, while the phenomena of polarising culture wars in many plural societies of the world today is a dismal reality, there is hope that some of the groups central to these clashes can eventually be part of the solution. In the case of Malaysia, culture wars are stoked by heightened threat perceptions as political competition that threatens the dominance of pro-Malay politicians increase (beginning with the pro-democracy Reformasi movement in 1998 and onwards). However, as unstable politics spikes, so do the distrust in politicians – unstable politics amid economic uncertainties over the last

five years, exemplified by political machinations that forced frequent changes of government, contributes to distrust in politicians to solve social problems. As the interlocuter from the Islamic revivalist group Helwa ABIM summed it up, the inability to trust politicians necessitated that groups struggle to stay in the "middle" – in effect, she called for de-polarisation.

What understandings and/or strategies, if any, do Malay women activists use to foster trust when engaging with women activists from different groups?

The findings from Chapter Eight indicate that the women do not formally use specific strategies to foster trust with women from the other groups. However, the informal ways in which the women from SIS and Helwa ABIM attempt to connect with each other – for example, by adding other women activists as friends on Facebook, liking each other's social media posts, speaking at each other's events in their personal capacity (i.e., without using their group's branding), and adopting personal attitudes of kindness in hopes of reciprocity from other women – are ways in which moralistic trust is being cultivated. We know that these relations of trust are being built because of the social learning outcomes identified in Chapter Seven. Chapter Eight also indicate that the women formally engage with each on an issue-basis, meaning they tend to meet mostly to discuss specific social issues. In recent times, the issues have been child marriage, female circumcision, and sexual harassment. The engagements on an issue-basis can be helpful in promoting greater understanding of each other's respective positions, but these engagements may not necessarily strengthen the bonds of moralistic trust between the women. Moreover, gaining greater understandings of each other's positions, especially on contentious issue, may not lead to agreement. For example, the women did not find agreement through their recent engagements on the issue of female circumcision. The research evidence on 'contact hypothesis', that is, the idea that inter-group interactions would foster greater understanding between different groups and reduce group polarisation is far more complex than initially posited (see Paluck, Green and Green 2019). While inter-group interactions do tend to typically reduce prejudice between different groups (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), there are many conditions that must be met to achieve it – this includes a sustained level of contact between the groups, the contact should be with several members of similar social rank, and a genuine exchange of ideas (de-Wit et al 2019; see also Allport 1954). The current levels of interaction between the women's groups as described by the women – i.e., meeting on an issue-basis, sometimes attending each other's social events, and informal interactions via social

media – are heading in a positive direction. However, these interactions are unlikely to be sufficient, in and of themselves, to strengthen the relations of trust necessary for feminist solidarity.

However significantly, the findings in Chapter Eight also revealed that the women already share remarkably similar understandings stemming from their shared experiences of resistance to sexist oppression, labelling, and polarised politics. These constitute key broad areas where the women can locate the common ground to build and strengthen the relations of moralistic trust between them. The argument here is that the women can more easily strengthen moralistic trust (i.e., the belief that one's own fate is connected to the fate of others in the wider community of Malay and Muslim women) over issues where there are already intersections in understandings. This finding suggest that women would likely be better able to connect when they can recognise that they stand on the same side on broader societal issues. By understanding that they stand on same side, women can avoid getting trapped in unproductive ideological debates that feed into culture wars, which can help to reduce polarisation between women's groups. In this sense, moralistic trust functions as a precursor to women's capacity to foster feminist solidarity.

In what ways are power, ideologies, and social hierarchies implicated in their respective understandings of social issues?

The findings in Chapter Six confirms that ideological worldviews shape the boundaries of the different Malay women's groups, so ideology is implicated in the women's understandings and their approaches to social issues are mediated by their attitudes to power. For example, the Islamic women activists' preference for closed-door engagements with religious authorities is rationalised as part of Malay "soft" culture. However, their preference makes it harder for Islamic women's groups to leverage on public pressure to push for change, which has the effect of reinforcing dominant political and religious power structures. Historically, closed-door engagements and negotiations were cultivated under the logic of "Malay unity" by the UMNO Malay politicians to keep intra-Malay political competition in check. In a similar way, the Islamic women activists' avoidance of confronting power vested in the religious authorities has the effect of limiting the democratisation of ideas about authority, gender, and religion in Malaysia. In this climate, it is understandable that SIS' confrontational approach is perceived

by some of the Malay women from secular groups as "radical", and by the Islamic women activists as "provocative".

On the other hand, SIS inadvertently reinforces the coloniality of secularism, i.e., dominant power structures shaping the global context and underpinned by the belief that secular and liberal norms are crucial for an enlightened modern society, which are exemplified by Western societies. When SIS emphasises gender equality in its Syariah legal reform advocacy, it does so with reliance on careful engagement with religious reinterpretations from a variety of Islamic scholars working from the vantage points of Muslim minority and Muslim majority contexts. However, these are complex legal arguments that not easily comprehended by every Malay women activist, much less by most Malay women in society. SIS is depicted as lacking religious credentials, faces demonisation and labelling by religious authorities as a deviant 'liberal' group, which are all contributing factors for the slow social uptake of SIS' Islamic feminist ideas in Malaysia despite its long history of activism. However, these factors are only part of the reason for the slow uptake – the poor social receptivity because of some women's inability or unwillingness to appreciate the theologically rooted arguments fully and / or some women's lack of resonance or disinterest with those ideas could also be relevant reasons.

Furthermore, as the discussion in Chapter Three showed, feminist concepts like gender equality have been historically and arguably are still today imbued with power through the "colonial difference"[91], and they can be harmful when deployed without adequate treatment of power differentials in identity categories like race, religion, class, age, and nationality. Because SIS emphasises gender equality as an overarching principle in its advocacy, the understanding that is prominent in the Islamic women activists' minds is that SIS is opposed to *wali* (male guardianship) and unequal inheritance laws and wants to fundamentally restructure Malay Muslim society to mirror Western societies by removing Muslim women's God-given rights and protections. There is no real justification for this misunderstanding of SIS' objectives, yet the point is that there is a level of resistance and suspicion to changing what the Islamic revivalist groups believe is part of Muslim society. However, as Chapters Seven and Eight showed, this worldview does not negate the fact that the Islamic women activists are already pushing for more equal social relations between men and women in practice – change

[91] The idea that hierarchical differences between groups of people are constructed and maintained through identity markers that have been made salient from the colonial experience through to the present times (Lugones 2010).

emanating from the grassroots is more effective and lasting than attempts at legal reforms imposed from the top.

Furthermore, the polemical-centred discourse tends to obscure the women's intersections across the ideological divide in relation to their experiences of resisting dominant social hierarchies – for example, resisting sexist societal norms and standards that relegate women to a subordinate position in relation to men, and rejecting simplistic labelling in society that attempt to box women into essentialist, static, and fixed categories that negates the reality of ideological diversity within their own groups and in wider society. The significance of the findings in Chapters Seven and Eight is that the women from secular multiracial and Islamic revivalist groups (especially those in their 20s to early 30s) are already unsettling the divide between Islam and feminism. The research for this thesis demonstrates that the notion that feminism is alien to Malaysian culture is changing. The findings are indicative that this current generation of women would be more receptive to a decolonial Muslim feminist discourse that is better attuned to locally rooted feminism(s) and power structures and is able to critique the dominant political and religious structures as well as the coloniality of secularism in the quest to improve the conditions of women.

Overall, the study challenges the commonly held perception that secular, Islamic feminist, and Islamic revivalist groups are unable to build a common ground because of irreconcilable differences. Relations of moralistic trust are being built between the women as evidenced by the social learning outcomes and the informal ways in which women are attempting to connect with each other. However, to strengthen these relations of moralistic trust for feminist solidarity, the women must make the effort to engage on topics that can more easily enable them to recognise that are on the same side. As the prior research on lowering polarisation have indicated, these efforts should ideally include a sustained level of contact between the groups, the contact should be with several members of similar social rank, and there should be a genuine exchange of ideas.

9.2: Original Research Contributions

9.2.1: New Empirical Insights on Malay Women's Groups

The research provides new empirical insights on Malay women's groups in Malaysia by producing a novel mapping of Malay women's groups along the prevalent ideological orientations in Malaysia, and providing insights into the thinking and experiences of the Islamic women activists, which is an understudied area in the research on Malaysian women's activism. Prior research on Malaysian women's activism had indicated that there was a distinctive ideological divide between the women from Islamic revivalist groups and the other women activists from secular and Islamic feminist groups (Ong 1990; Foley 2004; Ng, Mohamed and Tan 2006; Stivens 2006; Tong and Turner 2008), which was the focus of Chapter Two. These ideological differences between women's group were understood to be difficult to bridge, which partly contributed to the increasing levels of polarisation in society on the topic of Islam and women's rights over the decades. For example, Ng, Mohamed, and Tan highlighted that the Islamic women activists in the 1990s were vehemently opposed to the Domestic Violence Bill that was initiated by the secular feminist lobby, to the point that they even objected to specific terms such as violence against women and domestic violence (2006). Academic work on the Islamic revivalist and feminist perspectives on the Syariah legal system and Islam, especially around polarising public contention in recent history, also pointed to distinctive differences between women's groups (Daniels 2017; Moustafa 2018).

The research for this thesis found that there are indeed distinctive ideological differences that shape the boundaries of the women's groups. However, the research also revealed unexpected findings that are significant in reshaping what we think of Malay women in Islamic revivalist groups – for example, Islamic women activists expressing concern about the negatives of moral policing and the harsh mistreatment of the LBGT community by religious police; seeing value in teaching young girls about sex education and contraceptives; being against child marriage as a solution to the sin of pre-marital sex; and who are comfortable identifying themselves as both Muslims and feminists. In these instances, the Islamic women activists effectively adopt the same stance in practice (but perhaps not always overtly in public) with the secular and Islamic feminists. Compared to their counterparts in the 1990s, the Islamic women activists in this research use the same terms as secular and Islamic feminists to speak about contemporary issues affecting Malay women such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. Furthermore,

the women activists from the different groups have remarkably similar understandings stemming from their shared experiences of resistance to sexist oppression, labelling, and polarised politics, which opens the prospects for mitigating ideological polarisation and building greater relations of moralistic trust for feminist solidarity.

9.2.2: Expanding Theoretical Understandings

The research adds to the theoretical understandings on trust and ideological polarisation. The research shows that the context and conditions of polarisation in plural societies – at least in the world of advocacy and activism – can provide opportunities for trust building and de-polarisation between different ideological groups. The thesis theorises that having to navigate diversity in a polarised context, may force activists to unwittingly move across ideological divides, and in doing so, encounter complex situations that reshape their thinking, enabling them to shed some of the prejudiced perceptions of other groups. Reshaping perceptions of others is crucial as trust is ultimately risk-taking in the hopes that others will reciprocate in kind, i.e., an expectation of good will from the other (Govier 1997; Bar-Tal and Alon 2016; Van Lange et al 2017). The thesis theorises that under conditions of prolonged polarisation with no clear winner, groups can be more inclined to move across ideological divides and shed some of the prejudiced perceptions of other groups, as shown in the case of the Malay women's groups in Malaysia. Uslaner theorises that trust has a moral dimension which is underpinned by an optimistic belief that others share the same moral values as yourself (2002). According to Uslaner, those who hold moralistic trust are more willing to consider others, even those who may not carry the same ideological beliefs or policy opinions as themselves, as part of a shared wider community (2002). The thesis expands on this theoretical understanding of moralistic trust with the argument that relations of moralistic trust can be cultivated and strengthened between different ideological groups by locating the existing intersections in their understandings. Knowledge of the intersections in understandings makes it easier for people to believe that other groups will not let them down because their well-being and fate are connected to others in a wider community.

The research for this thesis also expands the theoretical understanding of the sectarianisation thesis. The sectarianisation thesis was originally developed to explain the dynamics of recent sectarian conflict in staunch authoritarian contexts in the Middle East, primarily in Saudi

Arabia, Iran, Syria, and Yemen (Hashemi and Postel 2017). The sectarianisation thesis draws upon the academic literature on ethnic politics which explains how identity markers are instrumentalised for political gains to make the theoretical case for mobilisations using religious sectarian differences for political gains, i.e., the sectarianisation thesis emphasised that the roots of contemporary conflict in Middle Eastern lie not in Sunni-Shiite theological divides but in the political contestations for power (Hashemi and Postel 2017; Arifianto and Saleem 2021). Chapter Five (the published paper in *Religion, State and Society*) expanded the theoretical understanding of sectarianisation thesis to explain the recent construction of the 'liberal' Muslim other as a sectarianising divisive tool in Malaysian politics. In doing so, Chapter Five showed that sectarianisation as an active process can also occur in contexts with competitive authoritarian political systems where there are free elections like in Sunni-majority Malaysia. Chapter Five showed that these intra-Muslim group divisions, driven primarily by political contestations for power, can occur within the same religious community (Sunni) that lack the historically rooted theological differences like the Sunni-Shiite divide, and these constructed divisions can occur in a relatively short span of time. The work on sectarianisation in Chapter Five opens several questions on the conceptual boundaries between sectarian, religious, and political identities, particularly considering the rise in political tribal-like sectarianism in secular contexts (see Finkel et al 2020) that share very similar characteristics with sectarianism in religious contexts.[92]

9.2.3: Epistemic and Methodological Innovation

The thesis integrated the beneficial elements from feminist standpoint and decolonial theories to establish the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach. The decolonial feminist standpoint research approach guided the development of the semi-structured qualitative interview questions and the research protocol for practicing an engaged and active reflexivity during the interviews with the interlocuters, and subsequently as a critical lens to analyse the interview data. The integration of the two theories is an epistemic and methodological innovation because it is geared at generating research that better helps to centre and understand Muslim women's varied perspectives and experiences. Chapter Three made the argument that this integration was necessary because relying on feminist standpoint theory only would be

[92] These are questions that the author of this thesis addresses in a chapter on conceptual understandings for a book on Sectarianisation in Global Contexts that she is co-editing.

incomplete in the critical evaluation of Muslim women, given the problematic tensions between hegemonic feminist theory and the study of Muslim women. Key concepts in the decolonial school of thought helped to make visible coloniality while holding to an overarching ethos of engaging with plural worldviews and knowledges on equal terms. The British philosopher Fricker argued that dominant concepts and categories which inadequately represents the experiences of marginalised groups and fails to recognise their capacity as knowers is a form of epistemic injustice (2007). As such, the decolonial feminist standpoint research approach is an epistemic and methodological innovation that ethically centres new metrics (i.e., the critical metanarrative) by which the multiplicity of women's standpoints is sorted and assessed. This approach will benefit scholarly inquiries and critical evaluation of the perspectives and lived experiences of Muslim women in postcolonial Muslim-majority contexts beyond Malaysia. The approach can also be useful in studying the experiences of other marginalised groups in non-Muslim contexts too.

9.3: Reflections on Future Research

The research opened several questions that could be explored in future research. One area would be to extend the study to explore women's groups in neighbouring countries with significant Malay and Muslim communities, i.e., to investigate if there are similar kinds of intersections and prospects for building trust between different women's groups in the neighbouring Muslim-majority context of Indonesia and in the Muslim-minority context of Singapore? If there are differences, what would account for those differences? What would be the prospects for transitional feminist solidarity between Muslim women in these Southeast Asian countries?

Another interesting avenue of research would be to explore intersections in understandings and prospects for trust between the different ideological groups in the Muslim majority contexts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Some of the Muslim societies in the MENA region are far more ethnically homogenous than Malaysia. Women's membership in Islamic groups in Morocco and Egypt only range between 25-30% (el-Husseini 2016) compared to women's high rates of participation in the Islamic revivalist groups, ABIM and IKRAM (more than 60%). Do these differences point to different outcomes in the MENA region?

Another area is to study whether there are possible intersections in understandings between male activists in ideologically different groups in Malaysia and in other country contexts – are men able to develop relations of trust across ideological divides or is cross cutting solidarity easier to achieve with marginalised groups like women?

9.4: Implication of the Research for Malay Women's Groups

In closing this thesis, it is fitting here to point out the significance of the findings for Malay women's groups. The findings indicate that the current generation of Malay women activists are now more inclined than previous generations to take the risk to trust women from other ideological groups, with an expectation of good will from the others. These bids for trust between women are an encouraging development because trust begets trust as evidenced by the recent instances of social learning and the informal connections women are making. The research points to the implicit recognition between women activists that there are some common experiences and similar thinking, which enabled them to shed prejudiced viewpoints and to see other groups in a more positive light. However, it is not clear from the research that the women themselves recognise just how similar their thinking are in respects to the specific issues identified in this thesis. The thesis made the argument that the relations of moralistic trust between the women can be strengthened through concerted efforts in engaging on issues where there are already known intersections in understandings and experiences. Strengthened relations of moralistic trust in turn reduces the impact of threat perceptions, which tend to feed into polarisation. To that end, and in keeping with the decolonial Muslim feminist ethos discussed in Chapter Three, the research findings will be shared with the Malay women groups that participated in the search, with the hopes that the women would be inspired in working toward depolarisation through trust building. State or civil society initiatives on promoting social cohesion could also benefit from the insights presented in this thesis by organising workshops that bring the different women's groups together to engage on the specific themes identified. Contrary to the popular belief, shaped by sensationalised media discourse on culture war issues, that ideological differences are irreconcilable, the research for this thesis enables us to better appreciate that Malay women can play an important part in the solution to de-polarisation in Malaysia.

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Appendix 1

Profile of Interlocuters

Assigned Pseudonym[93]	NGO	Age Group[94]	Educational Background
Nur	Helwa ABIM	Early 30s	Agricultural Science
Nisa	Helwa ABIM	Early 30s	Islamic Studies and Science
Sarah	Helwa ABIM	Early 30s	Finance; Counselling
Aisyah	Helwa ABIM	Early 40s	Physics
Putri	Helwa ABIM	Early 40s	Syariah Law
Nabilah	Wanita IKRAM	Late 30s	Media and Communication
Anis	Wanita IKRAM	Early 50s	Business Administration
Alia	Wanita IKRAM	Early 50s	Molecular Biology
Farah	Wanita IKRAM	Early 60s	Mathematics
Hana	Wanita IKRAM	Early 30s	Electrical Engineering
Siti	Sisters in Islam	Late 40s	Sociology
Najwa	Sisters in Islam	Early 50s	Accounting
Umairah	Sisters in Islam	Early 30s	Islamic Studies
Aina	Sisters in Islam	Early 40s	Finance
Qistina	Sisters in Islam	Late 40s	Law
Sofea	ARROW	Early 20s	Law
Hani	Dear Her	Early 20s	Law
Alya	KRYSS Network	Early 20s	Law
Balqis	MYER	Early 20s	International Relations

[93] The names for the pseudonyms were obtained from the webpage, ***Top 500 Girl Names from Malaysia***, and randomly assigned to the interlocuters.
(https://top-names.info/names.php?S=F&P=MLS, retrieved 5 November 2022)

[94] The age group intervals were categorised as follows:
20s = 20 to 29 years old
30s = 30 to 39 years old
40s = 40 to 49 years old
50s = 50 to 59 years old
60s = 60 to 69 years old
The term "Early" denotes below the mid-point of the group interval while the term "Late" denotes above the mid-point of the group interval.

Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

CONFIDENTIAL
For Interviewer Only

List of Guiding Questions for Interlocuter in the Semi-Structured Interview

Introduction

1. Please tell me about yourself.
    a. Do you work full-time with your group or are you a volunteer?
    b. If you are a volunteer, what is your profession outside of your activist role?
    c. What is your role / job scope within your group?
    d. How long have you been with your group?
    e. What is your age? Or age group, if unwilling to state the number?
    f. What racial / religious groups do you identify with?
    g. Do you have any political party affiliation / or political leaning?
2. Please tell me about your activist group.
    a. What does your group stand for? What does it aim to achieve?
    b. What is the size of your group? How many members? Do you actively recruit members?
    c. Would you consider your group to hold views and positions that are mainstream in Malaysian Muslim society? Or is your group working to change societal perceptions and push for reforms? If so, in what areas?
    d. Where does your group receive the funding to run its activities – is it through membership dues, public donations, the government or from other entities? Do you feel that the source of the finances places limitations on the number of activities/outreach that your group can engage in?
3. Please tell me about why you became an activist.
    a. What did you study in school? Is there any relation between what you studied in school and what you do now as an activist?
    b. Why did you get into activism?

c. Have you had prior experience with activism before joining your current group?

d. Why did you join your particular group? What is it about this group that drew you to it?

e. What do you hope to achieve with your own advocacy work?

4. Please tell me about your life.

    a. What are your daily activities in the course of your advocacy work? If you are a volunteer, then how do you balance your day-job with your advocacy duties?

    b. On average, how much time do you spend on your advocacy work in a day / week?

    c. Are your family members and friends supportive of your advocacy work?

    d. What do you think Malaysian society thinks of your advocacy work and your group? Are your views and/or your group's views easily accepted in society? If yes, why? If not, why?

<u>Perspectives and Experiences about Life in Malaysia</u>

1. Please tell me your top concerns about Malaysia.

    a. Do you follow Malaysian politics? What do you think of the politics in the country?

    b. How has the politics affected Malaysian society (and gender issues)?

    c. Do you think Malaysian society is polarized? If so, in what way and why?

    d. Do the politics affect your advocacy work; if so, how?

    e. Do you think Malaysia is an "Islamic state" as Mahathir had claimed in 2001? How would you define the Malaysian state?

    f. Is there anything about the Malaysian state that you (and your group) would wish to reform/change in relation to your advocacy work?

2. Please tell me your perspectives about race and religion in Malaysia.

    a. Some people have suggested that increasing religious conservatism among Muslims have contributed to intolerance in Malaysian society. What do you think religious conservatism mean? What do you think of this argument? If you believe there is greater intolerance in society today compared to before, can you please explain why and provide some examples?

    b. What do you think of the notion of universal human rights? What about the notion of Islamic communitarian rights – the idea that communal rights for the

Muslim community based on Islamic principles should take precedence over universal human rights? Can both human rights and Islamic principles be upheld in a society like Malaysia; if so, how?

c. What makes it difficult to uphold both human rights and Islamic principles? Who do you think has the authority to determine what human rights are and what Islamic principles are? Are these rights and principles up for negotiation in a multi-religious/multi-racial society like Malaysia?

d. What do you think of Malaysia's legal pluralism – secular, Syariah and indigenous laws? Is this an area of concern for you and your advocacy work? Examples?

e. Have you heard of "Arabization" in Malaysia? What do you think of this? Is this an area of concern for you and your work?

f. How about the argument that the spread of Saudi Arabian Wahhabism has contributed to greater intolerance among Muslims in Malaysia? What do you think of this? Is this an area of concern for you and your work?

g. What do you think of the terms the "liberal", "progressivist", "moderate" or "conservative" Muslim? What do you think society understands of these terms? What are the origins of these terms (i.e. where do these understandings come from/ what has influenced the understandings of these terms?)? Have these understandings impacted or shaped you and your group's advocacy work in any way?

h. Do you think that Muslims in Malaysia are more "religious" now compared to previous decades or are they more "secular" or "liberal"? If so, why? How do you know that Muslims are more "religious" or more "secular" or "liberal"? Do you think this societal phenomenon impacts your advocacy work in any way? If so, how?

i. Can Muslims be both religious and secular or liberal in orientation? How do you see or define yourself? Or if you choose not to define yourself in such terms, then why so?

j. Is Islamophobia an issue of concern in Malaysia? If so, in what way? Does it impact your advocacy work?

<u>Perspectives and Experiences with Activism on Gender Issues</u>

1. What are the gender issues in Malaysia that most concern you?

    a. Why do these issues concern you?

    b. Is there anything that you do to address these concerns?

c. What about your activist group?

2. Do you face any challenges or criticism in addressing your concerns on gender issues in your advocacy work?

    a. What is the nature of the challenge(s)?

    b. Was the challenge(s) you faced unexpected? Or was it something that you expected?

    c. How do you feel when handling these challenges? Do you have any support in handling the changes?

    d. What / who do you think can help you better tackle the challenge(s)?

3. Please tell me your perspectives and experiences on child marriage and LGBT/transgender issues in Malaysia

    a. What is your and your group's position on these issues?

    b. Why do you think these issues have become controversial in Malaysia?

    c. What have you and your group done on these issues?

    d. What are the challenges you have encountered (if you have directly worked on these issues)?

    e. What do you do to overcome the challenges?

<u>Perspectives and Experiences with Women from Different Activist Groups</u>

1. Are you aware of the perspectives of women activists from other activist groups?

    a. What do you think of (insert as appropriate: SIS, Helwa ABIM, Wanita IKRAM and Wanita ISMA)?

    b. Are you aware if the women activists from these groups share the same concerns and perspectives on issues as you?

    c. If they do not share the same concerns as you, what do you think their concerns are? What are their perspectives on those concerns?

    d. How did you gain this understanding of their perspectives?

    e. What about other women's groups in Malaysia that you know of? What do you think of these other women's groups?

2. Have you interacted or collaborated with women activists from the other groups on any gender issues?

a. Who have you interacted with and what was the nature of those interactions? Was there an objective you had in mind for that interaction/collaboration?

b. How did it go for you?

c. Would you recommend any improvements or changes to those interactions?

d. How did you feel about the women activists from the other group after the interaction/collaboration? Did you change your understandings about them, or did it confirm your prior understandings of them?

e. Were you able to find any common ground with these other women activists on particular issues? How so?

f. Would you be able to trust the women activists from other groups in future interactions or collaborations? If so, why, and if not, why?

g. Who would you be willing to trust and who would you not be willing to trust?

h. Is fostering trust with other women activists an important aspect in your advocacy work?

i. What are some of the relationship-building strategies that you have used in engaging with other women's groups? What are some of the challenges? What has worked and what has not?

3. Do you think more support can be provided? If so, from whom and how?

Closing

1. Overall, what is your experience with activism?

2. Where do you see yourself in the future? Do you see yourself continuing with this work?

3. Do you know of anyone from your group or other women's groups who would be willing to speak with me?

4. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 3

Information on Research Study for Participants

Research Study:

Muslim Women Activists and Experiences of Advocacy and Reform Work on Gender Issues

You are invited to participate in this research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like additional information, or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends and relatives, if you wish. We would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and you should only agree to participate if you want to. Thank you for reading this.

1. **Purpose of this research study**:
   The purpose of this research is to study the perspectives and experiences of Muslim women activists on their advocacy and reform work on gender issues in Malaysia. We hope to understand how Muslim women activists from different activist groups navigate the politically polarized Malaysian context in their activism.

2. **Why was I picked to participate in this study?**
   You have self-identified as a Malaysian citizen and as a female activist who is engaged in advocacy and reform work on gender issues in Malaysia.

3. **Do I have to participate?**
   No. You are free to decline to participate in the study.

4. **What will happen if I participate?**
   If you agree to participate, we will arrange for you to meet with Ms. Saleena Saleem, the PhD student researcher. The interview will likely last between 1 hour and 1.5 hours. You will be asked about your perspectives and experiences of activism in Malaysia, which will include some aspects of your personal life (such as job; education; age, political affiliation; race; religion). You are free to decline to answer any question. You are also free to withdraw your participation during the interview. You will not be approached by the researcher again for the purposes of this study after the interview ends.

5. **Are there any risks to participating in this study?**
   There are slight risks to participating in this study. In rare cases for some people, some questions could be upsetting. However, you can always choose to refuse to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. Should you face any distress during the interview, you are free to stop the interview at any time.

6. **Are there any benefits in participating in this study?**
   We do not expect you to personally benefit from your participation in this study. However, this is an opportunity for you to share your perspectives and experiences about activism in Malaysia.

This is also an opportunity for you to reflect and express your concerns on activism. This information will ultimately contribute to the breadth of knowledge on the topic. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

7. **What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?**
   If you are unhappy with how the research was conducted, or if you have any other concerns, you are free to contact Ms. Saleena Saleem, Dr. Karen Evans or Dr. Leon Moosavi to raise any issues.

8. **Will my participation in this study be kept confidential?**
   Your participation will be kept strictly confidential. Your real name will not be used in any publications and researchers will also ensure to omit any facts or personal information that could reveal your identity in published material.

9. **What will happen to the results of the study?**
   The results from the study will be used to produce publications. These publications will be made available in the public domain. Direct quotes from the interview may appear in these publications. However, as mentioned above, your identity will remain anonymous. While we will not provide you with feedback on the results of the study after your participation, we will send you the publications upon request.

10. **What will happen if I want to stop my participation?**
    If you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so at any time. You can also request that the interview be stopped at any moment and you can also withdraw your interview data from the study at a later date after the interview was completed. However, if the interview data was used in already published documents, then a withdrawal would not be possible.

11. **What happens to the research data from the interviews?**
    The interviews will be recorded using a digital device, and/or an online video-conferencing platform. Recordings on the online video-conferencing platform will be deleted after the interview and saved in a password protected laptop. The data will be saved with the participants' personal information anonymized. The data will be stored for 7 years to facilitate the publication of journal articles.

12. **Who can I contact if I have further questions?**
    Please feel free to contact Ms. Saleena Saleem by email (ssaleem@liverpool.ac.uk) or by telephone (+65-6908-6300) if you would like any further information about the study and your participation.

13. **Who can I contact if I have questions on the Ethical Approval of this research study?**
    If you have any questions regarding the Ethical Approval or any issue / problem related to this study, please contact:

    Mr. Mohd Bazlan Hafidz Mukrim
    Secretary of Human Research Ethics Committee USM
    Division of Research & Innovation (R&I), USM Health Campus, Penang
    Tel. No: 09-767 2354 / 09-767 2362; Email: bazlan@usm.my

Or

Miss Nor Amira Khurshid Ahmed
Secretariat of Human Research Ethics Committee USM
Research Creativity & Management Office (RCMO), USM Main Campus, Penang
Tel. No: 04-6536537; Email: noramira@usm.my

Confidentiality: Your original records may be reviewed by the researcher, the Ethical Review Board for this study, and regulatory authorities for the purpose of verifying the study procedures and/or data. Your information may be held and processed on a computer. Only research team members are authorized to access your information. By signing the participant consent form, you authorize the record review, data storage and data process described above.

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Appendix 4

Informed Consent Form for Participants

Research Study:

Muslim Women Activists and Experiences of Advocacy and Reform Work on Gender Issues

PhD Student Researcher: Ms. Saleena Saleem

PhD Supervisors: Dr. Karen Evans
Dr. Leon Moosavi

		Please initial box
1.	I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.	☐
3.	I understand that I can at any time during the period of the study ask for access to the information I provide. I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.	☐
4.	I agree to take part in the above study.	☐
5.	I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings to reproduce direct anonymised quotes in future publications; for online interviews, your participation will also be video recorded.	☐

Participant Name	Date	Signature
Researcher Name	Date	Signature

PhD Supervisors:

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