

EMPOWER



VOICE,  
VISIBILITY  
AND A VARIETY  
OF VICIOUSNESS

A MALAYSIAN STUDY OF WOMEN'S LIVED REALITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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# ABOUT THIS STUDY

This is the fourth study on internet rights by Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) under the APC-IMPACT Project. It builds on EMPOWER's previous research on online freedom of expression, freedom of information as well as freedom of assembly and association. It is a feminist response to increased instances of bullying and harassment on social media, seeking better understanding of how these forms of technology-related gender-based violence manifest in the Malaysian context. Importantly, it draws attention to the internet as a real living space for women where the harms of patriarchy are felt equally as they are offline. Insights gained from this study will aid in devising a more contextual response to the problems women face online including in laws and policies governing the internet.

Furthermore, the study aims to broaden the Malaysian discourse on internet rights by providing gender analysis on "non-political" discourse or commentaries that are not directly about the government, national institutions or political parties. It also prioritises voices of ordinary citizens who are not part of any established political organisation. They include women from marginalised and minority communities whose lived realities are recorded in this study. This study thus may serve to inform future research on internet rights and women's human rights in Malaysia.

# ABOUT THE APC-IMPACT PROJECT

The APC-IMPACT (India, Malaysia, Pakistan Advocacy for Change through Technology) Project is a special initiative by the Association of Progressive Communications (APC). It aims to address internet restrictions by promoting and protecting internet rights. Specifically, it seeks to advance freedom of expression, freedom of information as well as freedom of assembly and association as enablers of democracy. Through awareness raising and capacity building, APC-IMPACT engages with activists, national human rights institutions, media rights advocates, the judiciary, legal sector, women's human rights groups, other human rights defenders as well as civil society at large. The purpose of the initiative is to provide tools and networks so that violations of internet rights can be monitored, reported and addressed.

Partners for the APC-IMPACT Project are Digital Empowerment Foundation (India), Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) (Malaysia) and Bytes for All (Pakistan). Together they hope to impact how the internet is experienced in their respective countries in order for people to associate and express freely, and have open access to information that can improve their lives.

THE [VERY]  
BIG PICTURE

## THE SEAMLESSNESS OF LIFE, BUT NOT HUMAN RIGHTS

The line between offline and online is greatly blurred. In fact for many in Malaysia it does not exist. We are a nation where information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become integral to our everyday lives so much so what transpires offline and online are one and the same lived reality. As one respondent of this study said, “Being online is like a limb to me now. It’s so vital to my life.” But falling far behind this technological revolution is a political recognition of the internet as a key means by which people can exercise and enjoy their human rights.<sup>1</sup> Even though at least 78 percent of the country’s population is already connected, policy around access to the internet is still predominantly framed as economic infrastructure and opportunity. Issues such as political participation, human rights and gender equality remain reticent.

A false duality also occurs between a tangible “real-world” (offline) where everyone exists, and an elusive “cyber” world (online) where *some* people exist. In a society where internet access is not recognised as a right, compounded by the view that online spaces are not as “real,” events that occur in that realm are deemed to demand less accountability—especially personal events. This poses a great challenge for human rights standards to be observed online. Teaching Privacy, a group of cross-disciplinary researchers from Computer Science Institute and University of California-Berkeley, presents a compelling argument against this perception of duality:

It is all too easy to think of the Internet as a separate world, and to assume our

online identities, actions and relationships are somehow walled off from our “real-world” selves. This illusion of separation is created by the specialised, individually-operated technology we use to access the Internet—but (almost) everybody else we interact with is using the same technology to access the same sites and services ... Once information about us is shared online, it becomes part of what others know or can find out about us—and people do not have a strict dividing line in their minds between information they got from the Internet and any other type of information. In other words, someone’s information footprint isn’t just the information about them that exists in digital form; it encompasses everything that every other person, entity, or database knows about them.<sup>2</sup>

With population growth, along with the accelerated expansion of the Internet of Things (IoT), internet penetration in Malaysia is expected to increase to about 195 percent by 2025.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we would virtually be a fully connected society in a matter of a few years. The government aims to achieve this through development initiatives such as the Economic Transformation Programme launched in 2010, which among other things commits to providing broadband internet for all.<sup>4</sup> Given the current and projected

1 United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*, Frank La Rue. May 2011. A/HRC/17/27, accessed May 5, 2017, [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27\\_en.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf).

2 “The online world is inseparable from the ‘real’ world,” *Teaching Privacy*, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.teachingprivacy.org/online-is-real>.

3 MIMOS Berhad, *National Internet of Things (IoT) Strategic Roadmap* (Kuala Lumpur: MIMOS Berhad, 2014), 19, accessed May 13, 2017, [http://www.mimos.my/iot/National\\_IoT\\_Strategic\\_Roadmap\\_Book.pdf](http://www.mimos.my/iot/National_IoT_Strategic_Roadmap_Book.pdf).

4 “EPP 7: Ensuring Broadband for All,” *Performance Management And Delivery Unit*, accessed May 15, 2017, [http://etp.pemandu.gov.my/Communications\\_Content\\_-\\_Infrastructure-@-Communications\\_Content\\_and\\_Infrastructure\\_-\\_EPP\\_7-;\\_Ensuring\\_Broadband\\_for\\_All.aspx](http://etp.pemandu.gov.my/Communications_Content_-_Infrastructure-@-Communications_Content_and_Infrastructure_-_EPP_7-;_Ensuring_Broadband_for_All.aspx)



population on Malaysia's internet, it is imperative for the government to recognise that universal human rights must also apply online. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) affirms in 2016 that the same rights people have offline must also be protected online and in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).<sup>5</sup> The UNHRC resolution is not something for Malaysia to ignore considering it was a two-term member of the very body from 2006 to 2013.

When Malaysia embraced the digital revolution in the 1990s, it did so with a progressive vision to create an internet that provides “continuing enhancements to quality of work and life” and regulated “for the long-term benefit of the end user,” among other great aspirations.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, the government envisioned a connected society where life is experienced seamlessly offline and online, hence the establishment of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in 1998 to facilitate that transformation. It is not unreasonable therefore to expect MCMC's policy recommendations and public outreach in the last two decades to result in an online environment that is both open and upholds human rights. In the two decades of its existence, MCMC's policy recommendations and public outreach should have resulted in an online environment that are both open and uphold human rights. Unfortunately, the MCMC has failed to deliver.

## THE TRAJECTORY OF LAWS AND INTERNET RIGHTS

Instead of seeing positive reform to laws that govern the internet, we see outdated and repressive laws that violate basic freedoms offline being applied online.<sup>7</sup> Oftentimes these laws are used by the government to quell political dissent. In more recent years, and riding on global concerns of terrorism, new laws were created to give the government even more control

on the internet. This includes authorising online surveillance and censorship under the pretext of national security.<sup>8</sup> So while the online domain remains elusive to many, the government on the other hand draws clear perimeters in order to consolidate and protect its own power as well as commercial interests.

Activists have fought for many years against the narrowing of Malaysia's internet sphere, however the discourse remains largely concerned with political expression. The issue came into greater focus a few years ago when the government blocked a number of blog sites and news portals amidst allegations of a global corruption scandal involving senior members of the administration and government investment fund, 1MDB. Since then, there has been increased cases of investigations and arrests related to political comments expressed on social media.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, criticism against members of the ruling party or monarchy, and comments deemed as insulting Islam, the official religion of the state. Essentially, these are comments that challenge Malaysia's official structures of power in a political environment where the government is under greater public scrutiny.

It became evident that people's expression and participation in online conversations about national politics were ever more surveilled and systematically censored by the government. In some cases the surveillance is aided by pro-government citizens who take it upon themselves to document and report comments they come across on social media. There have also been cases where comments made on obscure accounts, or even in closed channels, were not spared.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the motivation to aid in surveillance is to shut down criticism at a time when public sentiment is increasingly against the government. This is not unlike tactics used by online bullies against individuals who challenge other kinds of status quo, which this study investigates further.

5 United Nations, Human Rights Council. 32/...*The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet*. June 2016. A/HRC/32/L.20, accessed May 13, 2017, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/32/L.20](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/32/L.20).

6 “History,” *Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission*, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/about-us/history>.

7 EMPOWER, *Status of freedom of expression online* (Petaling Jaya: EMPOWER, 2015), 10–11.

8 Controversial national security laws established within the last five years include the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 and National Security Council Act 2016.

9 Suara Rakyat Malaysia, *Human rights report Malaysia 2016 overview: Civil and political rights* (Petaling Jaya: SUARAM, 2016), 15, accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.suaram.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Overview-2016-Digital-Edition.pdf>.

10 Mohd Fahmi Mohd Yusof, “Lelaki ditahan hantar mesej bergambar jelik hina PM,” *Berita Harian*, July 2, 2016, accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.bharian.com.my/node/170726>.

## A CASE FOR “OTHER” EXPRESSIONS AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS ONLINE

While political expression may dominate discussions about internet rights but in Malaysia, a great many other expressions are shared online everyday that escape the interest of government and perhaps even many champions of civil liberties. These expressions are not directly about the government, its institutions or any political entity. Rather, they are opinions about a variety of issues people encounter everyday. Nevertheless, these “non-political” expressions are equally important in the context of internet rights. The United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2011 describes that freedom of expression and opinion as “indispensable conditions for the full development of the person” and “form a basis for the full enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights.” Importantly, the Committee defines freedom of expression to include commentaries on one’s own affairs, religious discourse as well as cultural and artistic expressions.<sup>11</sup> It follows that any impediment to these freedoms must be addressed.

This study seeks to explore this largely overlooked facet of online expression. In particular, when it concerns the voices of women. Women constitute at least 40 percent<sup>12</sup> of Malaysia’s online population yet much is to be known about their experience in exercising their freedom of expression and participation. Thus, three main motivations propel this study: The first is to contribute to the Malaysian discourse on internet rights, looking specifically at expressions that are not typically considered political. Secondly, to analyse the issue of freedom of expression and participation online from a gender perspective. And thirdly, to better understand the challenges women face in exercising their freedom of expression and participation online. This is vital given the projected growth of internet penetration in the country and the increasingly sophisticated use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

At a conference held in 2016, the Malaysian Digital Association described Malaysia’s online population as “Internet addicts,”<sup>13</sup> and according to MCMC’s internet users survey, it is in fact women who spend more time on the internet. Not only were women found to be “slightly more engaged with their internet in terms of intensity of use,” they are “savvier in getting things done online.” Besides banking and shopping, women are also likelier to seek information via the internet. Importantly, the survey revealed that women in Malaysia engage more in social networking compared to men with an adoption rate as high as 81 percent while men at 78 percent.<sup>14</sup> These figures tally with global trends of social network adoption among women. According to a 2016 Nielsen report, women are also spending increased amount of time on social networks.<sup>15</sup> These trends alone warrant a closer look at women’s experiences in these spaces.

As a reasonably connected society arguably someone in Malaysia is expressing something online at any given time. Based on the above data, chances are she is a woman: a fun moment with friends on Instagram; a frustration about pop culture on Twitter; a series of sizzling sexts<sup>16</sup> on Telegram; a dark confession on Tumblr; a parody video on YouTube, just to name a few. Whether in private or more public settings, women are also congregating in groups: a band of colleagues exchanging notes on WhatsApp or a network of hobbyists trading tips on Facebook. If, as it stands, the government is largely uninterested in such personal daily matters, does it follow that these expressions are completely free from surveillance and censure? What other forms of surveillance might then come into play? What other kinds of intimidation might occur, and who are the likely targets? What is being policed?

11 United Nations, Human Rights Committee. *General comment No. 34*. September 2011. CCPR/C/GC/34, accessed May 7, 2017, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

12 Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, *Internet users survey 2016: Statistical brief number twenty*. (Cyberjaya: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016) accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/IUS2016.pdf>

13 Malaysian Digital Association, “2016 Malaysia digital landscape: Exploring the digital landscape in Malaysia—Boosting growth for a digital economy” (presented at the Digital Integration & Business Transformation Asia Conference, Kuala Lumpur, August 3–4, 2016), accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.malaysiandigitalassociation.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Malaysia-Digital-Landscape-August-2016.pdf>

14 Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, *Internet users survey 2016: Statistical brief number twenty*. (Cyberjaya: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016) accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/IUS2016.pdf>

15 Sean Casey, “2016 Nielsen social media report,” *Nielsen*, January 17, 2017, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2017/2016-nielsen-social-media-report.html>

16 “Sext” refers to a sexually explicit photograph or message sent via mobile phone according to the online Oxford Dictionaries.

Combined with the force of global capitalism, the advancement of ICTs and miniaturising of computing devices have decentralised control of information and content distribution from “Big Brother,” or the government, to ordinary individuals dubbed “Little Brother” (Charyk 1985, 43). Aided by technology “Little Brother” can now effectively mimic operations once monopolised by the government. That is, sophisticated ways of surveillance and disruption or dispersion of information. Today, ordinary individuals are able to use these powers to intimidate or silence others in the online sphere. Studies on gendered surveillance show time and again how it directly impacts women’s freedom of expression and participation. This study too notes surveillance as a *modus operandi* in bullying and harassment cases in Malaysia. Whether by the government or by Little Brother, surveillance remains a “historical tool of patriarchy, used to control and restrict women’s bodies, speech and activism.”<sup>17</sup>

But while the advancement of internet-related technologies may have borne cutting-edge instruments that can be used to harm women, it has also provided tools for women’s empowerment. Where women’s voices used to be muted, they can now be heard online. Where women used to be invisible, they can now be seen online. That said, as more people occupy the online sphere, they bring with them patriarchal values and norms that perpetuate the unequal social, political and economic status of women. As such, gender-based violence occurs online too and takes on new forms. In their statement to the 57th Commission on the Status of Women, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) noted that gender-based violence was on the rise and “becoming part of women’s experience of violence and their online interactions.” The statement further highlighted:

[Violence against women] that is committed, abetted or aggravated through the use of ICTs and in online spaces are part of the continuum of violence against women and is a significant barrier to women’s and girls’ ability to take advantage of the opportunities that ICT provide for the full realisation of women’s human rights and

development.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, this study inquires: How safe is it for women in Malaysia to have voice and visibility online? What forms of violence do they face in exercising their freedom of expression and participation, particularly on social media where they are most active? And as another respondent pointed out, it is one thing to worry about one’s safety against state oppression but what about safety against one’s own peers?

17 “Feminist Principles of the Internet-Version 2.0,” *Association for Progressive Communications*, accessed May 7, 2017, <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/feminist-principles-internet-version-20>.

18 “APC Statement to the CSW 57th Session: Violence against women and information and communications technology,” *GenderIT.org*, accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.genderit.org/resources/apc-statement-csw-57th-session-violence-against-women-and-information-and-communications-t>.



# THE STUDY

## ABSTRACT

In a patriarchal society, technology-related violence is known to greatly affect the lives of women as well as other marginalised and minority communities. Consequences include violations to their freedom of expression and participation on the internet. Malaysia has seen increased instances of technology-related gender-based violence especially in the form of bullying and harassment on social media involving private individuals.

These cases are also occurring within a larger shift of heightened political and religious conservatism in the public sphere as well as a climate of economic uncertainty. The seriousness of their occurrence however is often overshadowed by other concerns about internet rights related to violations perpetrated by the state. As a result, there is limited contextual information to inform effective remedies whether through policy reform or response by women themselves. Through a combination of ethnographic approach and discourse analysis, this study investigates the circumstances that lead to violence and analyses the tactical aspects of how violence is perpetrated in order to deconstruct the power dynamics at play. It also examines how women's lives and their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are subsequently impacted by online violence. Taking into consideration the nature of intersectionality, this study focuses on the lived realities of Muslim women, queer and transwomen, indigenous women as well as women in the arts and entertainment. Combined, they form a range of women most visible to perpetrators as well as the most ignored by society. From the analysis of their experiences, we are able to assess current avenues for redress and make recommendations for improvements.

## METHODOLOGY

In March 2015, Aishah Tajuddin, a video presenter for local online satirical programme '*Kupas*', received rape and death threats following an episode mocking the Kelantan state government for championing *hudud* law (Muslim criminal law). Aishah faced intense condemnation and harassment online which led the programme owner to remove the episode from

YouTube.<sup>19</sup> Aishah herself left the programme and has not returned to '*Kupas*' or any other online video shows. Hers was an extreme case of technology-related violence involving a woman that received wide media coverage.

Numerous cases have since been reported in the media. However, they mostly involve public figures while cases affecting ordinary people remain largely ignored. What these cases have in common is the gendered nature of the violence as they occur on social media, but media reports provide little insight on *why* and *how* this phenomenon is happening. This study therefore is designed to address that information gap by first recognising such cases as technology-related gender-based violence. It explores the influence of broader sociopolitical trends and examines the mechanics of how violence unfold particularly on social media.

Women's circumstances and experience of violence are often interpreted and subsequently trivialised by non-feminist observers. Therefore, it is crucial in studies such as this to apply feminist theory and methodology to understand women's experience from their own point of view and not from the dominant perspective in society (Reinharz 1992, 52). After all, the best way to understand the impact of technology-related gender-based violence is by listening to those who have experienced it themselves. Feminist communication theory is applied to look into power dynamics in social media engagement while allowing for individual stories to form multiple realities and interpretations (Rakow and Wackwitz 2004, 4).

<sup>19</sup> Rashvinjeet S Bedi "Radio station removes hudud video after presenter threatened," *The Star Online*, March 20, 2015, accessed June 3, 2017, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/03/20/bfm-radio-presenter-aisyah-tajuddin-threatened-over-hudud-video/>.

This study takes a qualitative approach to provide opportunity and flexibility for the respondents to describe their own experiences. It is also to guide the researcher to other aspects of the women's lives that may contribute to their exposure to violence. The outcome is both a methodical feminist analysis as it is a documentation of Malaysian stories about life on the internet—a life of gendered events happening to a gendered bodily subject, therefore producing a narrative of that life (Järviuoma, Moisala, and Vilkkö 2003, 46). A combination of research methods are employed in this study, namely interviews, ethnographic observations on social media, discourse analysis as well as the use of secondary data.

Social indicators such as ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age and economic class provide the basic framework. These are indicators that can be integrated and disintegrated, thus allow for closer observation of how women's intersecting identities interact with power and ultimately, violence. Four categories of women are identified for research based on three broad considerations: Women impacted by national trends of political and religious conservatism; women from marginalised or minority communities; and women who rely on social media for income generation. Together they present a range of identities, motivations and social media behaviours for study. The four categories of women are as follows:

- Muslim women
- Queer and transwomen
- Indigenous women
- Women in the arts and entertainment

In their study on Islamisation in Malaysia, Jason P. Abbotta and Sophie Gregorios-Pippas observed how religion has transformed society over the last three decades. "From banking to law, from dress to education policy, almost no sector of Malaysian society has escaped the growing influence of Islam upon the socioeconomic and political make-up of the country," they said (2010, 135). The result is an ethnic and religious polarisation that Malaysian feminist activist Zainah Anwar described in her newspaper

column as "gotten from bad to worse."<sup>20</sup> What does this mean for Muslim women? How does this national transformation impact the diversity of Muslim women's expression online? These questions form the basis of selecting Muslim women as a category in this study.

Religion has also been used as a reason to victimise lesbian, gays, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Malaysia. From film and broadcasting policies that only allow depictions of LGBTs if they "repent" at the end,<sup>21</sup> to state-sanctioned boot camps for effeminate boys<sup>22</sup> and numerous arrests of transwomen over the years. Homophobic and transphobic expressions have become normalised since sodomy charges were held against the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. That said, social media has provided some space for LGBTs and their allies to speak out. Their voices are heard, but how are they received? As little is known about the day-to-day experience of Malaysian queer<sup>23</sup> and transgender women on social media, this study thus seeks to uncover.

Indigenous women are a constituency that EMPOWER has been working closely with over the years on issues concerning civil and political participation. They are among the most marginalised groups in the country therefore this category of women is selected in order for their experiences to be recorded and taken into consideration for future advocacy and policy recommendations. Women in the arts and entertainment on the other hand is a category chosen to inform this study on the experiences of those whose livelihood depend on their personal and continued participation on social media. These are women who cannot simply decide to delete their social media accounts over cases of bullying and harassment without it affecting their income. As practitioners in the arts and entertainment, they are

20 Zainah Anwar, "Into the future—together," *The Star Online*, February 5, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/sharing-the-nation/2017/02/05/into-the-future-together-new-developments-in-malaysia-amid-the-current-madness-in-the-world-show-th/>

21 Julie Bolcer, "Malaysia: Gay characters OK, if they go straight," *Advocate.com*, March 22, 2010, accessed October 11, 2017, [https://web.archive.org/web/20100324190945/http://www.advocate.com/Arts\\_and\\_Entertainment/Entertainment\\_News/Malaysia\\_Gay\\_Film\\_Characters\\_OK\\_If\\_They\\_Go\\_Straight/](https://web.archive.org/web/20100324190945/http://www.advocate.com/Arts_and_Entertainment/Entertainment_News/Malaysia_Gay_Film_Characters_OK_If_They_Go_Straight/)

22 Tashny Sukumaran, "No to 'sissy' boot camp," *Free Malaysia Today*, April 20, 2011, accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2011/04/20/no-to-sissy-boot-camp/>

23 The term "queer" in this study is used broadly, encompassing non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities.

also expressive on social media and seek visibility for increase the value of their work. This study aims to better understand how their audience responds to them, and how they manage adversities.

Respondents were also selected to provide a span of social media following on any given platform, from those with less than 1,000 followers to those with more than 10,000 followers. In the marketing sector, individuals with large social media following may be considered “influencers” where they have the reach to popularise certain products or ideas. A social media influencer in this sense is defined as any individual who has “credibility and a niche” in their respective fields.<sup>24</sup> There is no consensus on the number of followers to qualify as an “influencer” as the range varies from a minimum of 5,000<sup>25</sup> to a minimum of 10,000.<sup>26</sup> The number of followers is taken into consideration in this study to measure a respondent’s reach (or “influence”) and exposure to others, and if this might factor into the risk of encountering violence.

The concept of gender-based violence follows the definition stated in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women to mean “any act of violence based on gender, which may result or actually results in physical, sexual or psychological harm, including threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, in either private or public life.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, gender-based violence is recognised as a result of patriarchal culture and structures that value control and domination over femininity and feminine traits (Becker 1999, 24-25). This study is focused on two common forms of technology-related gender-based violence, namely bullying and harassment.

On explanations of gender, as noted by Mary Holmes, the definition has over the years shifted emphasis from the material and economic to the symbolic,

or the sphere of meaning (2007, 63). In this study, gender is understood as “the set of roles, rights, representations, expectations and values assigned to each sex,” with established power relationships where women are deemed inferior and less valued.<sup>28</sup> Gender is also recognised as a continuum that includes identities other than male and female.<sup>29</sup> To note, respondents here identify as women, though not all identify as cisgender.<sup>30</sup>

Interviews and observations on social media were conducted between March and July 2017. A total of fifteen women were interviewed, nine of whom have social media accounts viewable to the researcher. And while respondents were asked about their use of social media in general, this study is most interested in their experiences on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. The interviews, conducted in person and via online video and voice calls, were semi-structured with a set of standardised questions answered by all respondents and further questions asked during the interview process. Four main areas of questioning guided the process:

- Ownership and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs)
- Access to internet services
- Social media usage and engagement behaviours
- Experience of bullying and harassment on social media

Interviews were conducted individually with the exception of two respondents who attended a session together. With permission, some of the interviews were documented using a voice recorder while others by text notes. Respondents were given the option of anonymity to protect their privacy and security through a consent note that also provided background information on this study. Other ethical considerations include the option to withdraw from the interview process at any given time, or to

24 Laura Forer, “The Lowdown on Social Media Influencers,” *MarketingProfs*, February 22, 2017, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://www.marketingprofs.com/chirp/2017/31547/the-lowdown-on-social-media-influencers-infographic>.

25 Alexandra Ma, “How To Make Money On Instagram,” *HuffingtonPost*, December 29, 2016, accessed June 5, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/make-money-on-instagram\\_us\\_55ad3ad6e4b0caf721b3624c](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/make-money-on-instagram_us_55ad3ad6e4b0caf721b3624c)

26 “Are fake Instagram influencers deceiving brands?” *Mediakix*, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://www.mediakix.com/2017/08/fake-instagram-influencers-followers-bots-study/#gs.XzCIfYE>.

27 United Nations, General Assembly. *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women*. December 1993. A/RES/48/104, accessed Jun 11, 2017, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>.

28 Mar Camarasa and Daniela Heim, “Theoretical and methodological framework,” in *Gender Violence Effects Indicators*, September 2007, accessed Jun 7, 2017, [http://www.surt.org/gvei/docs/theoretical\\_and\\_methodological\\_framework.pdf](http://www.surt.org/gvei/docs/theoretical_and_methodological_framework.pdf)

29 “Definition of ‘Gender Spectrum’” *The Queer Dictionary*, accessed June 5, 2017, <http://queerdictionary.blogspot.my/2014/09/definition-of-gender-spectrum.html>

30 “Cisgender” refers to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex, according to the online Oxford Dictionaries.



withhold certain information from being published. Respondents were also given the option to request for the voice recording to be discarded following the publication of this study. The average duration of interview was about 1 hour 15 minutes.

As it is for every study, this research has its limitations. The small sample size of fifteen respondents does not reflect the population of more than 9 million women<sup>31</sup> who are online in Malaysia. Additionally, the geographical location of respondents during the course of research is disproportionate to the actual percentage of people accessing the internet in the different states. Up to 33 percent of respondents reside in Selangor which has a national access rate of 21 percent. Meanwhile, 20 percent of respondents are based in Kuala Lumpur where the population accounts for 9 percent of the national access rate. A further 20 percent of respondents reside in Pulau Pinang which accounts for less than 5 percent of the national access rate.

Together, respondents from Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Pulau Pinang make up the majority of the sample. That said, 40 percent of them were originally from other states where they grew up and this informs the research of other social aspects that may influence their online experiences. Among them are Daphne Iking (Sabah), Hannah (Terengganu), Que (Melaka), Yara Khoo (Kuala Lumpur) and Yvonne Lam (Perak). With the exception of Hannah, the women still return to their hometown to visit family. Faye on the other hand was raised abroad, but today visits her family in Sarawak. Maimuna Zikri is a Malaysian currently living abroad but was included in this study for two reasons. First, she has experienced online violence perpetrated by people in Malaysia. Secondly, she is candid on social media about being in a same-sex marriage with a partner who lives in Malaysia.

The respondents are also mostly between ages 20 to 40 which means the experience of adolescent girls and women above 40 are not fairly represented. Two adolescents approached for this study had to withdraw their participation over issues with school examinations and parental consent, reducing the total number of respondents from seventeen to fifteen. On other issues concerning representation, it should be noted that only one transwoman was interviewed

and her access and experience on social media may not reflect that of other transwomen in Malaysia. Additionally, not all of the respondents' social media accounts were viewable in order to make thorough observations. Where the researcher had no access, she was dependent entirely on the respondents' statements.

Finally, while this study is also meant to be a documentation of life stories, it recognises that they are a retelling of the respondents' original stories, interpreted by the researcher and in her own words.

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31 Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, *Internet users survey 2016: Statistical brief number twenty*. (Cyberjaya: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016) accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/IUS2016.pdf>

## PROFILES

This study is built on the lived realities of the following women. The brief overview below provides context to their individual profiles as social media users. Names marked with the asterisk (\*) symbol have been changed to protect their privacy and security.

DAPHNE IKING, 39, is an independent presenter with experience working in broadcasting. She is an avid social media user with close to 130,000 followers on Twitter and more than 170,000 followers on Instagram as of August 2017. Daphne, who is Kadazan, depends on social media to promote her work, conduct research and connect with family. She currently lives in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

LESLIE,\* 40, is a Penang-based project freelancer who identifies as lesbian. She is active on social media where she meets and socialises with other lesbian women. Social media has allowed her to create spaces where she can be “out” among friends and openly share her views on all kinds of issues. For Leslie, the internet is crucial for her to live an authentic life.

FAYE,\* 39, is a Kuala Lumpur-based educator who is also an advocate for right to sexuality. She uses social media to promote her programmes in performing arts and to build a solidarity network for lesbian women in Malaysia. About seven years ago, Faye created Facebook pages for these two interest groups which today has a membership of more than 3,000 and 1,000 respectively.

MAIMUNA ZIKRI,\* 36, works in a Malaysia-owned company overseas while her partner and children are based in Malaysia, making the internet an important enabler for the family to stay in close touch. On social media, Maimuna shares stories about family life in hope to normalise the very idea of a queer family, specifically queer Muslim family, to her Malaysian followers.

HANNAH,\* 28, is a queer artist, illustrator and writer. She started blogging anonymously in her teens as an avenue to express herself freely while living in a violent environment at home. As a known full-time artist today, she is reliant on social media, namely Instagram and Twitter, to showcase her work to potential clients. Hannah is currently based in Pulau Pinang.

MARYAM LEE, 25, is a postgraduate student at a public university in Kuala Lumpur and freelances for projects promoting intercultural dialogue and human rights. She strongly identifies as a Muslim feminist and uses social media to talk about life experiences and current issues. Maryam’s posts are public to more than 6,500 followers on Twitter and more than 5,500 subscribers on Facebook as of August 2017.

IDORA,\* 29, works in small-town Bidor doing general clerical tasks for local businesses. She is active on Facebook where she belongs to a number of Orang Asli interest groups. She has only recently created an Instagram account. Idora is a Semai who still lives with her community. She alternates between staying with her parents’ families in Bidor and Tapah, Perak.

NALISA ALIA AMIN, 28, is from Kuala Lumpur where she works in e-commerce. Social media has played an important role in helping her come to terms with her body image. Today she uses social media to share her thoughts on a variety of issues including promoting body positivity. Nalisa has a following of more than 13,000 people on Twitter and more than 5,000 on Instagram as of August 2017.

QUE,\* 30, organises events to build a support network for queer women. Through blogging she is able to disseminate crucial information about living a healthy queer life, particularly to women seeking Chinese language material and support systems. While actively involved in empowering queer women, Que also does other human rights work in Pulau Pinang where she resides.

VENITA,\* 24, is involved in community work in her village in the outskirts of Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. She is an eager Facebook user who often shares updates about her community work as well as her personal activities. While she is also on Instagram, most of her updates are on Facebook. Venita, a member from the Temuan tribe, also uses WhatsApp to keep in touch with family and friends.

RIHANNA,\* 22, is a transwoman studying at a private university in Malaysia. She belongs to a small group of students who use online social networks to organise LGBT rights awareness activities on campus. Social media enables her to access information and network with other transwomen in Malaysia and abroad. Rihanna currently lives with her family in Subang Jaya, Selangor.

YARA KHOO,\* 41, is a single parent living in Kuching, Sarawak, where she works as a freelance writer. She used to be active on Twitter and Facebook but in more recent years decided to limit her usage to Instagram. Yara also offers feeding therapy advice to other parents with whom she keeps in regular contact through WhatsApp.

SHIDA AMAL,\* 26, is a blogger with a social media following numbering more than 79,000 on Twitter and more than 36,000 on Instagram as of August 2017. Her large following gained her the status of “influencer” where she sometimes receive commissions from commercial brands to promote products to her social networks. She resides in Subang Jaya, Selangor.

YVONNE LAM,\* 34, works as a copy editor and social media manager producing content related to the arts. This includes moderating conversations on a variety of issues across multiple social media platforms. She was part of the early wave of social bloggers in Malaysia where she shared about her life as a young lesbian woman. Yvonne currently resides in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

SITI,\* 38, is a Temuan woman from Shah Alam, Selangor. Married to an ethnic Malay, she is also a parent to school-age and adolescent children. She is active on Facebook and Instagram where she shares updates with family and close friends. Her primary reason for being online however is to receive information about school activities from her children’s teachers via WhatsApp.



# MAPPING CONNECTIONS

## THE COST OF GETTING ONLINE

Siti lives in a double storey link house in the suburban city of Shah Alam, Selangor. Her neighbourhood, where homes range between RM350,000 (about USD 87,500) to more than RM1,000,000 (about USD 250,000), was built on the ancestral land of the Temuan tribe, the original inhabitants of the area. Siti, who is Temuan herself, attained the house as compensation from the housing developer in a land acquisition process. The living room of her house, where she lives with her husband, five children and mother-in-law, is sparse. Her neighbours are mostly *orang luar* (“outsiders,” mainly ethnic Malay) and many are more well-off. Located close to the city’s administrative centre and a royal palace, the middle-class neighbourhood is equipped with internet infrastructure. Siti herself is connected to the internet via a smartphone purchased by her husband, which she shares with two of their adolescent children.

This is the first smartphone for the 38-year-old and she has been using it for about three to four years. Prior to that she was using an analogue phone. Siti is subscribed to a pre-paid mobile internet plan where she pays RM10 (about USD 2.50) for each top-up. In a month, she spends an average of RM30 (about USD 7.50) for connection but is unsure how much data she receives. Siti believes she gets up to 3GB for each top-up and says she rarely exceeds her quota despite sharing her phone with her children. When asked if she is paying a “fair amount” for internet connection, Siti laughed and said she does not know. But what she knows for certain is that internet connection is now a “necessity.”

Other respondents feel the same way but unlike Siti, they believe they are not paying a fair amount for internet connection. Hannah, who access the internet from a laptop, tablet and smartphone—all purchased for her by others—feels her broadband service is expensive. For about RM130 (about USD 32.50) a month the home-based artist receives 25GB

of data, which she says is not enough. With online meetings, transferring of large files, social media management and access to entertainment, Hannah and her partner find themselves having to purchase additional data by the end of each month. Worse yet, like many others who live in apartment buildings they have limited choices in broadband services. There is only one broadband service provider for their apartment in Pulau Pinang, so Hannah and her partner have no choice but to settle for one of the provider’s data packages. To circumvent the problem of insufficient data, Hannah sometimes works out of cafés that offer free WiFi. But this depends on her state of health and she also has to consider the cost of public transportation. There are also other costs involved when working out of a café, like food and beverages, free WiFi notwithstanding.

Daphne Iking finds herself with a similar frustration, however her problem is not so much about the lack of data, but the speed of it. Daphne, who left a career in television broadcasting, now runs a business venture with her husband. Together they operate from their apartment where they also raise three children. She recently started a YouTube channel which has proven to be a good business decision. However, this entails having to regularly upload videos online, which was when they discovered how slow their internet connection really was. It could take hours just to upload a ten-minute long video. But in a move to switch to a faster broadband service provider, they then discovered the burden was upon them to create customer demand. According to Daphne, the alternative service provider would not install the basic infrastructure required in the building unless more residents signed up. Unless she can make that happen, Daphne has no choice but to settle for the current and slow internet option. For a fast-paced business person like her, time is money.

Daphne herself is a heavy internet user. She is connected to the internet on three devices—a computer, tablet and smartphone—all of which she personally owns, with each device subscribed to its own internet service account. From banking to entertainment, her personal life is reliant on the internet. Each month she pays a minimum of RM340 (about USD 85) which gets her about 74GB of data. During busy working months, she finds herself having to purchase additional data, but this is something she is prepared to do. It is expensive, she said, but she has factored the additional cost in her monthly budget. “I complain, I whine, but there’s nothing much I can do about it,” she added.

This is the sentiment expressed by most of the respondents no matter their level of affordability. Whether on pre-paid or post-paid services, using less than 10GB or more than 50GB of data, the women feel internet service is expensive and there is nothing they can do about it. They pay what they can for a data plan and have to put up with whatever quality of service they get in return. This is especially so for those who live in areas where there is only one internet service provider available. For Leslie, who uses two smartphones and a laptop to get online, being on a data plan is much cheaper for day-to-day text messaging compared to mobile short message service (SMS) where one is charged for each message sent. That said, she still feels she is paying a lot. For these women, their grievances about cost is a combination between getting insufficient amount of data and the speed of data itself. Blogger Shida Amal and Idora are the only ones who feel they are charged a fair price for internet access. Shida pays about RM30 (about USD 7.50) a month for 5GB of data on her smartphone while Idora does not spend more than RM50 (about USD 12.50) a month. Idora’s data plan offers weekly specials so the data she receives varies each month depending on whether she chooses to purchase during the offer period. In Shida’s case however, she also has internet access at home which is paid for by her brother.

In terms of mobile reception, the women are generally able to connect from where they live and places they frequent. Idora is the only respondent who said she can go up to weeks in a month without internet connection when she stays with her father’s family in a village in Tapah, Perak. Not being connected does pose some challenges with work but Idora said her employers are sympathetic and show leniency. Some respondents say they lose connectivity when travelling to different parts of Malaysia. For example, Daphne complains about not having connection when

visiting family in the more rural parts of Sabah. For Maimuna Zikri, who lives abroad, making voice calls to her partner using an internet-based application is impossible when her partner visits family in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. On these occasions, they can only be in touch by text message. Leslie on the other hand said she sometimes experiences connection problems on both her smartphones when in Bukit Mertajam in Pulau Pinang.

Yvonne Lam is the only respondent who cited blocked websites as a problem of cost, over and above slow data speed and inconsistent coverage. She would like to access websites hosted on Medium, a blogging platform which most internet service providers in Malaysia have blocked following a government restriction on *Sarawak Report*, a blog hosted on Medium.<sup>32</sup> In her view, paying for internet service should entail having complete access to the internet. On the other hand, Que is the only respondent who said she should not have to pay for internet access at all. She believes the internet is today a fundamental part of every person’s right to access information and therefore, the service should not be charged. She also believes internet service providers in Malaysia exploit consumers by imposing expensive rates for limited services. If not for her partner who wants to be in touch via internet while on the go, as well as the convenience of using navigation applications, Que would rather not subscribe to mobile internet service.

All of the women in this study access the internet by smartphone where they are most active. This corresponds with findings in various studies about internet access in Malaysia where at least 90 percent of people reportedly go online via smartphones. Prices of smartphones vary depending on brand and technical specifications, and a brand new one can cost anywhere between RM250 (about USD 62.50) to more than RM3,000 (about USD 750). The women interviewed generally said they are not the kind to upgrade to a new device every time a new model is launched. Instead, the devices are used until they reach their shelf life, which is usually between three to four years. With the exception of Siti and Venita, they also each own a computer which they use to go online. Only Daphne, Hannah, Maryam Lee and Yara Khoo own tablets.

32 “Why has Malaysia blocked Medium?” *Engadget*, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://www.engadget.com/2016/01/28/malaysia-medium-block-explainer>.

## SOCIAL MEDIA OF CHOICE

By definition social media is “a collection of internet-based communities that allow users to interact with each other online.” Social media thus includes web forums, wikis, and user-generated content (UGC) websites.<sup>33</sup> Text messaging applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp and WeChat are also as much social media as the more popular platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. In this era of so-called sharing economy, text messaging platforms are considered the “dark social,” a term coined by Alexis C. Madrigal, where content is shared outside of what can be measured by web analytics programmes.<sup>34</sup> In other words, activities and flow of information within the realm of online text messaging are still largely undetectable by marketers. Therefore, analytical data on demographics and types of content shared in this space is still largely unavailable in public domain.

In Malaysia, the most popular internet-based text messaging application is WhatsApp. In a 2014 report by global research company Kantar TNS, at least 70 percent of those online in Malaysia are said to be communicating through WhatsApp.<sup>35</sup> The research, which looks at digital behaviours across 50 countries, found those in Malaysia “among the most attached to their digital devices” and showing “high levels of engagement with content and a desire to stay connected with friends and family.” This is true for the women interviewed in this study. While a few may also use applications such as Telegram, WeChat and iMessage, all the women are on WhatsApp for everyday communications with friends, family or colleagues. The platform not only allows them to send text messages but also voice recorded messages, photos, videos and links to other content.

All the respondents are also on Facebook. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission’s (MCMC) internet user survey 2016, more than 95 percent of Malaysia’s online population are on Facebook, making it the most popular social

media in the country.<sup>36</sup> Some of the women have also downloaded the Facebook Messenger application to use as a text messaging platform. In the case of Maryam, she also makes voice calls through Facebook besides doing the same on WhatsApp. The lure of Facebook is also driven by a fear of missing out. As 28-year-old Hannah said, “I only have it because other people have it. And I didn’t start getting jobs in Malaysia until I opened a Facebook [account].” While all the women interviewed use Facebook primarily to socialise and to keep up with popular content circulating within their network, being within those very networks may also widen their economic opportunities. Even if their accounts are set to private, direct referrals can be made by friends within the platform itself.

Instagram is the second most used social media among the respondents with 11 or 73 percent, of them on the platform. The third is Twitter where nine, or 60 percent, of them are active. According to Nalisa Alia Amin, she prefers to use Twitter to express herself in a more public way. “I can type out what I’m currently feeling, my thoughts and my ideas. I prefer to write what I want to express instead of using visuals,” she said, comparing her usage between Twitter and Instagram. YouTube is a common social media the women access, mostly for entertainment, although Daphne, Que and Yvonne actively use the platform for work. Yara, who home schools her child, uses YouTube’s educational content in her lessons.

## ORDINARY ROUTINES OF GREAT IMPORTANCE

When asked about their daily online routines, the respondents generally say their days often begin with checking on unread messages, either on text messaging platforms or other social media. So, before errands and other obligations get underway, the women usually respond to those who made contact since the last time they were online. Hannah, whose closest friends live in different time zones, makes it a point to prioritise replying to their messages over others. Her mornings provide a window to be in touch with friends in real time, which is very important to her. Hannah has a mental health condition that

33 Per Christensson, “Social Media Definition,” *TechTerms*, August 7, 2013, accessed June 3, 2017, [http://www.techterms.com/definition/social\\_media](http://www.techterms.com/definition/social_media).

34 Alexis C. Madrigal, “Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the Web Wrong,” *The Atlantic*, October 12, 2012, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/dark-social-we-have-the-whole-history-of-the-web-wrong/263523/>.

35 “Malaysian Internet users amongst the most socially engaged in the world” *Kantar TNS*, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.tnsglobal.com/press-release/malaysian-internet-users-amongst-most-socially-engaged-world>

36 Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, *Internet users survey 2016: Statistical brief number twenty*. (Cyberjaya: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016) accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/IUS2016.pdf>



sometimes causes extreme anxieties, and positive interaction with trusted people helps her get through the day. Social media thus plays a vital role in her life as it provides a channel to connect with her most trusted friends and start the day on a positive note.

Likewise for Maimuna, who is based overseas on work assignment and only returns to Malaysia at most twice a year. Social media enables her to be in touch with her partner and two children throughout the day in an affordable way. Her primary use of the internet is to keep in touch with family and friends in Malaysia besides reading the news. But she also said, “I can do without reading the news for a day but I need to keep in touch with my partner so she knows I’m okay, and I know she’s okay.” Maimuna is the only respondent in this study who disclosed she is in a long-distance relationship. Her dependence on social media is not unlike many others in long-distance relationships. In her case, she is also a parent and there is a sense of wanting to be present for her children in whatever way possible during this period where they are separated.

The daily routine of keeping in touch and chatting with loved ones is something Rihanna also relates to, although in her case it is quite different. Rihanna is a transwoman in her early twenties who feels she is living an authentic life everywhere but home. She has forged close friendships with people online and offline and maintains these relationships through social media. The relationships are invaluable as they nourish her with affirmation and support. Like many others her age, she is frequently texting one friend or other on the internet and sharing updates on social media about daily happenings, including sharing photos. In doing so, she is conscious about normalising transwomen’s visibility online. At the same time, she needs to be very careful to avoid being detected by her family. For this reason, she adopts a semi-pseudonym on social media.

This may be a common concern among queer women in this study who are not out to family. Although sexuality may be something one can hide from public view, it is hardly the case for gender expression. The queer women here are cisgender and, unlike Rihanna, do not really have to worry about how they come across in person to disapproving relatives. “My family is not accepting and are very conservative Christians,” she said, “so I live a double life where at home I have to bind my chest and dress like a boy.” It is only when away from family that Rihanna can be herself. It is crucial therefore that her family is kept out of her social media space. If discovered, she risks

being disowned and cut off from financial support. As a full-time college student, this is a fate she cannot afford. “I have to pander to them for a couple more years until I graduate and get a job,” she said.

A United States-centred Pew study on the social impact of widespread use of social networking sites, or social media platforms, found that people with online social networks strongly feel they receive emotional support, companionship and instrumental (tangible) support from their online peers. They rate higher than those who are online but not on social media, and even more so compared to people who are not connected to the internet. The study found that those who use instant message on social media has an average of 12 percent more core confidants than those who are online but not on social media.<sup>37</sup> The women interviewed in this Malaysian study also indicate that social media is a significant enabler of solidarity and support.

Apart from building relationships and support networks, social media is also an important source of information. At least nine, or 60 percent, of respondents said they rely on social media for news. For women like Que and Leslie who have stopped reading newspapers or watching television news, social media is their main source of information for current events. “News” is therefore what gains the widest circulation within their social networks. The significance of an event or issue is thus determined by popularity and in some cases, like Facebook, the platform’s algorithm. Arguably this may mean they lose out on other important news that are not within their network’s interest. But at the same time, a national issue the government would rather suppress might gain enough attention on social media resulting in public pressure and positive action.

The nature of affinity groups on social media also channels topical information. For example, women in the arts and entertainment may share content that are useful or interesting to those in their network. Updates on more localised news may also be shared in close-knit groups, such as a family or a neighbourhood group, where the information is most valued. Some may be critical information relating to safety and basic rights. In the case of Idora and Venita who are both indigenous women, Facebook in

<sup>37</sup> Lauren Sessions Goulet, Keith Hampton, Kristen Purcell, and Lee Rainie, “Social networking sites and our lives,” *Pew Research Center*, June 16, 2011, accessed June 5, 2017, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/06/16/social-networking-sites-and-our-lives/>.

particular is an important platform for them to receive news and share updates concerning the Orang Asli community in Malaysia. In this regard, social media is not a space where the women are mere recipients but are also active distributors of news and information. The reality of social media where people can post real-time updates to be shared with a wider audience also facilitates citizen journalism. Virtually any of the women in this study are empowered to be citizen journalists whenever the occasion necessitates.

To conclude, among the most common daily activities on social media, keeping in touch with friends and family as well as accessing and sharing news, have the most significant impact on the women's lives. While the jury is still out on whether social media is "good" or "bad," at least in these instances, the various platforms do contribute positively to the women's lives.

# EXAMINING AGGRESSIONS

## VOICE AS A POINT OF CONTENTION

18-year-old Cassandra Hsiao made headlines this year when her heartfelt college essay about learning English caught the attention of the world's top universities. Cassandra then received offers from all eight Ivy League colleges and news of her success was widely shared in Malaysia, a country she identifies as home despite growing up in the United States since age five. A child of a Taiwanese father and Malaysian mother, Cassandra was attacked on social media for not being a "real" Malaysian.<sup>38</sup> On Reddit, one commenter said, "Uh duh? She ain't even Malaysian, also Oxford and Cambridge is no less prestigious than those Ivy League universities if not better." Someone else said, "She was just born in Malaysia, then moved to US when she was 5 [years old]. She's not even Malaysian to begin with."<sup>39</sup>

Cassandra's reaction to the comments she saw online also generated media interest. She reportedly wrote on her blog, "The questions still sting: do I even belong anywhere? Can I truly call anywhere home?" Some might argue the attacks against her were not gendered but a closer look at her essay, and her very being, may suggest otherwise. Cassandra's winning story was about her mother, her mother's native tongue and life journey.<sup>40</sup> They are part and parcel of what makes Cassandra who she is today: the daughter of a migrant Malaysian woman who, against all odds, received offers from the most elite

of higher learning institutions in the Western world. The story of her complex identity is gendered, beginning with her own voice as a young woman and the maternal lineage she identifies with. When people deny her claim to identify as part "Malaysian," they are essentially invalidating her gendered voice and delegitimising her gendered history.

In their writing on feminist communication theory, Lana F. Rakow and Laura A. Wackwitz remind feminists that we must assume the world as we know it is unjust and requires change. They further say:

[Feminist communication theory] assumes that we can and must look to the meanings and experiences of women and others who have been invisible or devalued in order to understand our subordination ... Women's voices are silenced in so many ways that the simple act of speaking may itself become a political act. (Rakow and Wackwitz 2004, 6).

Rakow and Wackwitz identify three themes—difference, voice and representation—to guide the feminist study of communication. In citing difference, they note that certain linguistic, material and political systems establish oppressive relationships within and between racial and ethnic groups, genders, sexualities, economic classes, and political orientations. They stress the need to acknowledge that women's voice are too often denied access to communicative forums, or admitted only to have their ideas dismissed as deviant or irrelevant. Representation is also important, they argue, in order to avoid attempts to represent any group that is not one's own, which can have detrimental material and political consequences (9).

38 Nicholas Cheng, and Terence Toh, "Yale-bound but still stung by mean M'sians," *The Star Online*, May 1, 2011, accessed June 17, 2017, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/05/01/yalebound-but-still-stung-by-mean-msians-negativity-to-be-a-driving-force-in-arts-degree/>.

39 "Sorry, Malaysia - You Don't Get To Be Proud Of Cassandra Hsiao's Success," *Reddit*, accessed July 25, 2017, [https://www.reddit.com/r/malaysia/comments/64hufh/sorry\\_malaysia\\_you\\_dont\\_get\\_to\\_be\\_proud\\_of/](https://www.reddit.com/r/malaysia/comments/64hufh/sorry_malaysia_you_dont_get_to_be_proud_of/).

40 Harry Shukman, "This first generation immigrant just got into all eight Ivies," *The Tab*, April, 2017, accessed July 25, 2017, <https://thetab.com/us/2017/03/31/got-into-all-ivies-64085>.

Applying Rakow and Wackwitz's feminist framework in examining the case of Cassandra Hsiao, as well as the women in this study, all the different issues relating to power and oppression begin to present themselves. Let us consider the case of Idora. Idora belongs to multiple groups on Facebook, many of which are Orang Asli community groups with some more active than others. She recalled an incident in one of those groups where a young male member posted a photo of a young woman without her knowledge or consent. The young woman is from a different tribe whose village is located on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur while the man who posted the photo is from a more rural part of Malaysia. Idora described the young woman in the photo as looking "urban" and said the caption was an offer by the young man to set up sexual encounters with her.

It was unclear if he personally knew the woman in the photo but insinuations were made in his caption about urban young Orang Asli women being "loose" as they intermingle with city folk. The post was essentially a violent disapproval of Orang Asli women integrating into city life, being indistinguishable from city folk (*orang luar*, or "outsiders") or presenting themselves as having personal agency outside of the Orang Asli community. An explosion of reactions ensued on that post and lasted for days. According to Idora, many men agreed with the post although there were also many others, women and men, who defended the woman in the photo. Importantly, Idora and some others called for the post to be removed as it was slanderous and sexist. But despite the days of controversy it caused, the post was not removed.

Contrast that with Idora's own experience of posting in the group. In 2013, Idora made a general comment about the need for Orang Asli people to develop personal leadership skills in order to be empowered to take on greater roles beyond their own tribes. It was a reminder meant to inspire members of the community but instead her comment drew in an angry mob. It was the weeks leading up to a hotly contested general election in Malaysia and some indigenous men had announced their candidacy. Idora's comment was read as an attack on the candidates and she was labelled a traitor and agent of their challengers. She described the attacks as being relentless, going on for days and spiralling into personal insults. Some comments even made their way into her private Facebook inbox. Each time, she would defend herself and try to bring the discussion back to leadership skills and empowerment, but her attempts were futile. Few defended her and eventually, after a few days of attacks, Idora's post

was removed by the group's administrator.

The two cases recounted by the 29-year-old reveal the deep insecurities of the Orang Asli community who have been systematically marginalised and oppressed by the state for generations. On the one hand, concerns over assimilation, and on the other, their eligibility in national politics. But the cases also show how women, especially those who exercise their personal agency, ultimately bear the burden of these insecurities. As the powerless goes against the might of the state, they take it out on women in their own community, which suggests a strong perception that women in these Orang Asli communities are deemed to have an inferior status to men. For Idora, her experience was too much to bear. Following the intense harassment she faced, and after her post was taken down, Idora decided to deactivate her Facebook account. She only returned to Facebook in more recent months, but only to see that a young man can so proudly outrage a woman and do so with impunity.

In early 2014, a popular blog believed to be run by a group of Kuala Lumpur-based and mostly male lawyers found itself at the centre of social media controversy. An anonymously written article, originally published on a local news portal, was posted on the blog as a humorous response to a woman's inquiry on what to get her boyfriend for Christmas. The following is an excerpt:

We would suggest you think out of the box (or dress, or negligee, whatever) and dispense with the usual Christmas shopping madness and instead consider doing him something, or simply just doing him good.

For example, you could do something unheard of by young urban women (which we assume you are instead of some 53-year old Bangsar cougar driving a BMW Z3), such as giving him a foot massage (or fellatio), then set out the deliciously cooked meal you have been slaving over throughout the day (or fellatio) and then cuddling with him while feasting on the latest X-Art video clips he downloaded throughout the whole of last week (or fellatio).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Lord Bobo, "Ask Lord Bobo: What To Get Your Man For Christmas," *Loyar Burok*, February 4, 2014, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://www.loyarburok.com/2014/02/04/asklordbobo-christmas/>.

Yvonne Lam recalled her reaction to the article. She said, “I called their fellatio article sexist, badly written and badly edited, [and] they took issue with that.” As a result, she was harassed on multiple social media platforms by members of the blog along with their friends. Through their personal accounts as well as organisational accounts, Yvonne saw comments across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram either bluntly denying the article was sexist or claimed she was unable to take a joke. They initially tagged her in their comments to indicate they were up for a meaningful discussion on the matter. After a while, as Yvonne stood her ground and as more people supported her view, they stopped tagging her altogether but continued to make comments about her.

In contrast, cisgender men who took the same position as Yvonne did not experience the same fate. “Oddly enough [the men’s] comments were much better received,” she said.<sup>42</sup> Asked if she thought her gender was a factor, Yvonne responded, “Of course!” She later discovered through private channels that the author of the article was indeed a man who was also a practicing lawyer and part of the blog’s membership. The popular blog, and lawyers associated with it, were otherwise known to champion human rights and civil liberties but the article and controversy following Yvonne’s comments unveiled the sexism that exists within the human rights-legal fraternity.<sup>43</sup> The debacle tarnished the lawyers’ “progressive credentials” and caused those associated with the blog to defend themselves. But to Yvonne and others like her, the lawyers not only failed to redeem themselves but further proved their sexism in how they engaged differently with women compared to cisgender men.

42 At least one cisgender gay man responded to the article, taking the same view as Yvonne. He too received backlash, but unlike Yvonne, they were mostly contained within the author’s network of close friends. The harassers belittled him, questioned the man’s academic achievements and insinuated he should not take issue with the fellatio article as he was a gay man.

43 A conference organised by the Association of Women Lawyers and the Malaysian Bar Council titled “Enhancing Leadership and Performance Skills for Women Lawyers”, scheduled to take place on 16 November 2017, received backlashes by fellow legal practitioners and people within the same network on social media. This took place despite responses by a member of the Association of Women Lawyers that male lawyers can still engage as participants. It was a backlash initiated by a male human rights lawyer. Most of the comments denied the existence of sexism within the legal fraternity and that the conference is “sexist” and “biased” against male lawyers, see: <https://m.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155934314518488&id=701443487&set=a.10150140783638488.336287.701443487&source=57>

Maryam Lee is another respondent who is aware of the gendered attacks she encountered on social media. During the month of Ramadhan in 2016, Maryam decided to pose a direct challenge to society’s moral policing when she ate a meal at a restaurant during fasting hours. Maryam, who did not fast on that day due to menstruation, was reprimanded by the restaurant manager. By eating in public, she was accused of insulting Islam. The manager further said his restaurant could be fined under the state *syri’ah* law (Muslim law) for serving food to Muslims. One male customer then saw it fit to enter the exchange and told her she had no “right” to eat in public during the fasting month. She recounted the incident on social media saying women were unjustly punished for their biological makeup. She challenged the popular view that Muslims who are not fasting, for whatever personal reasons, should not be allowed to eat in public. The response she received was overwhelmingly hostile, especially from Muslims.<sup>44</sup>

She was condemned as a bad Muslim who behaved in an uncivilised manner. “I wish I’d been anonymous because anonymity would have created a safer environment for me online,” she said. Maryam felt the attacks were much more directed at her personhood when people knew her name and face. But at the same time she also believes it is important to reveal one’s identity when speaking up on issues. “A safe space that is meaningful is one where I can still show who I am, rather than hide myself in order to be safe.” Maryam believes it is important to speak up in public and said she is prepared for debates. What she cannot deal with is when people resort to personal attacks. She claims to self-censor not only in what she says but also in her approach. For example, her Facebook post about the restaurant incident was carefully written to address the issue of moral policing, a term she used deliberately and repeatedly throughout her post. Nevertheless, people were focused on the “audacity” of her action instead.

Milder comments often were often presented as advice, but laced with condescension. For instance: “*Dik, tahulah adik in pandai dan bijaksana tapi janganlah melawan perintah Tuhan* (Young sister, I’m aware that you are clever and wise but don’t

44 Maryam’s action was also condemned by the chairperson of a local Muslim civil society group usually known for their progressive approach to Islam. While he claims to be against moral policing, he disagrees that Muslims who are not fasting should eat in public. He said Maryam’s action was unnecessary and unethical, and trivialised her action as a mere social experiment.

challenge God's command)." Even those who agree with her views sometimes resort to tone policing. "People have been telling me, 'Maryam what you're saying is okay, *tapi cara kau cakap tu...*' (but it's the way you say it...)," she said. "People keep saying that to me no matter how I present my views. I've come to a point where I don't care how I say things anymore," she added. In more recent months, the 25-year-old took to Twitter to talk about her decision to stop donning the hijab. She knew her views would not be taken well but it was an important personal journey she wanted to share. She believes her decision to remove the hijab is right and based on research by progressive Muslim scholars. As expected, she was attacked and called a deviant. One young person likened her to a virus that needed to be destroyed. Others said she was a threat to the religion, and some went further to say "*darah dia halal*" (killing her is permissible).

In Shida Amal's case, she was encouraged to kill herself. It all began about two years ago in 2015 when she started being harassed by a group of people on Twitter who called her "fat" and "stupid." "Of course it was hurtful," she said, "but I still thought it was harmless." It was months later that she realised the harassment had a pattern and felt like an organised attack. Each time the harassment would start with one person tweeting an insult and then the others would chime in. There was no escape for Shida because they tagged her in their tweets. She started blocking some of them after numerous attacks, but they always found a way to get someone else who was not blocked to tweet her. The harassment happened on a daily basis for about a year and she managed to reach the core members as well as the motivation behind their attacks. With a Twitter following numbering tens of thousands, Shida was popular on the platform. The group was trying to discredit her and dampen her popularity.

Shida believes there are between five to ten people in the group. "They harassed me on everything I shared online to the point that I felt I couldn't breathe," she said. Besides blogging, Shida also ran a business and each time she posted updates about work, they would reply to say her work was "stupid." When she launched a product, they would say the same thing. Worse yet, if she retweeted comments from people who bought her product, or read her writing, the same group would then harass those people too. Some among the harassers have large following, making attacks against Shida visible to many others. As a result, more people would participate in the harassment. Shida said, "It came to the point where

[it felt like] 'hating Shida' was the new cool thing to do." And the situation reached tipping point for her last year when she found out her own best friend was complicit.

Behind the scenes, her best friend was sharing information about her to the group, including private photos. One was a photo of her showing her middle finger to the camera and another where her cleavage was visible. These were private photos from a holiday trip that were never meant to be shared with others, and certainly not to be shared in the public domain. The photos however were made public by the group, and during the month of Ramadhan. "You know how Malays can get on Twitter," she said, in reference to a moralistic mob behaviour on the platform among many ethnic Malay Muslims. Shida herself is Muslim, so photos of her showing the finger, or having her cleavage visible, would make her an easy target for moral policing. The photos, coupled with rumours being circulated by the group, caused Shida to fall into depression—a condition she had been diagnosed with by a mental health professional. Within twenty-four hours since the second photo was release, she became suicidal.

Shida went public to say the harassment had gone too far and disclosed she was feeling suicidal. She begged for it all to stop. Claiming she was merely seeking attention, the group then encouraged her to go ahead and kill herself. The exchange between them went viral quickly and more people got involved. "I felt really ashamed," she said, "I couldn't even stand up for myself against online bullies." Shida deactivated her Twitter and Instagram accounts that very day and was admitted into hospital where she received treatment for a week.

Religion influences the social media experience of many respondents in this study. Eight of the fifteen respondents in this study explicitly mentioned religion as a force they encounter on social media whether directly, like the case of Maryam, or indirectly through a public morality shaped by religio-cultural norms. This is not unlike the Malaysia experienced offline where religion and religious morality has encroached into almost every aspect of public life. As one news columnist said, Islam today even pervades into spaces that previously had no religious value.<sup>45</sup> The strongest drivers of this phenomenon are the

45 Zurairi AR, "Why 'creeping Islamisation' is no joke," *Malay Mail Online*, January 3, 2016, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/opinion/zurairi-ar/article/why-creeping-islamisation-is-no-joke>.

government and political parties that weaponise religion for political gains. Issues that evoke feelings of insecurity, especially among Muslims, are played up to encourage communal affinity and political affiliations based on religio-ethnic identity.<sup>46</sup>

This phenomenon has negatively impacted the social media experience of women in this study. Based on the interviews, the most affected are those who identify as Muslim, and those who identify as queer or trans. With the exception of Daphne Iking and Faye, who is of mixed parentage, the three other indigenous women interviewed did not in any way mention religion as a factor in their experience of bullying or harassment. The queer and transwomen on the other hand are acutely aware of their vulnerability in this context. Not only are their gender (trans) and sexuality criminalised by law, they are also subjected to heightened online surveillance by anti-LGBT (an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) Muslim groups and individuals. A recent example is an LGBT event that was exposed on social media resulting in individuals being identified and systematically attacked.<sup>47</sup>

Organised violence is part of the reason why Yara Khoo withdrew from social media. The 41-year-old used to be active on Facebook and Twitter, two platforms she used as a listening post to inform her work in communications as well as to engage in discussions as a private citizen. Yara recalled a particular experience in 2013 when she was attacked by cybertroopers.<sup>48</sup> On the day it happened, Yara logged on to social media to find her timeline full of people criticising the Prime Minister's leadership. Other conversations stemmed out of that including one she participated in about life in Malaysia. She did not consider these conversations "political" per se, rather they were about how people's lived realities were impacted by poor public policy and services. Soon enough, Yara was swarmed by a group of cybertroopers who began to harass her

for expressing her views about quality of life in the country. When others came to her defence, they too became targets of harassment. The attacks went on overnight and the experience left her feeling angry because she knew it was an organised attempt to shut down an important public conversation.

"To me, hostility is an inherent risk of being on social media," she said, so the incident itself was not the reason she left Twitter. After all, she never felt inhibited from expressing her opinions online. Her reason was parenthood. The same year of the online harassment incident, Yara had a child. She realised that seeing organised violence on social media, as well as daily news about Malaysia, had a profound emotional and psychological impact on her. It was not a state of being she wanted for herself as a parent so she gradually phased out of Twitter, as well as from Facebook. "It's toxic," she said, "and it came to a point where I didn't want to be exposed to it anymore." Yara has since limited her social media to Instagram and WhatsApp where her account is private and she only sees updates from close friends and family. While the psychological and emotional impact she suffered was not resultant from any harassments or attacks made directly to her, Yara said it was due to seeing others being targeted by cybertroopers almost on a daily basis. So in this particular case, we see how one woman's voice recedes from social media not so much due to her personal experience of being harassed, rather the general culture of violence occupying the space.

For Hannah, exposure to technology-related violence started at an early age. She was an active blogger in her teens and her site was accessible to public. Her blog was a personal journal where she talked about life and even shared photos of herself. In her interview, Hannah recalled a few occasions where people with male-named profiles left comments she described as "micro-aggressions." The comments were a combination of racism and sexism without exactly using harsh language, but they affected her nonetheless. Unfortunately, Hannah was also facing violence at home so the experience of online aggression did not help at all. She eventually stopped blogging towards the end of secondary school when her family moved to a different city. By the time newer social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram became popular, Hannah was already diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Being aware of her condition, Hannah is more careful about her engagements on social media today. Her Facebook is private while her Twitter and Instagram are left public, but focused on promoting

46 Leo Suryadinata, "'Islamization of Politics' in Indonesia and Malaysia?: A Commentary by Leo Suryadinata" *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute*, January 12, 2017, accessed July 3, 2017, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/4721-islamization-of-politics-in-indonesia-and-malaysia-a-commentary-by-leo-suryadinata>.

47 Aedi Asri, "Organiser defends 'Gay Iftar' breaking of fast event," *Free Malaysia Today*, June 15, 2017, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/06/15/sponsor-defends-gay-iftar-breaking-of-fast-event/>.

48 "Cybertroopers" is a Malaysian term that refers to an organised group of individuals on the internet who execute counter-propaganda on behalf of political parties and using various tactics including harassment.



her work in the arts.

She uses her art to raise awareness about mental health issues and so far her posts have not caused backlash from followers. That said, Hannah still sees violence unfold on social media despite adopting a deliberate content management strategy and careful curation of people she follows. When things she sees online start to affect her, Hannah takes social media breaks by going offline for a period of time.

Like Hannah, Siti is also careful with how she engages with people on social media. She maintains a close network of friends and family thus making her Facebook and Instagram relatively safe spaces for her to share updates about her life. Siti said she personally has not experienced harassment on social media but has seen it happen to others. She has however seen racist remarks made against Orang Asli people in her neighbourhood. *“Akak pernahlah nampak orang luar ni ejek-ejek Orang Asli kat Facebook, kata muka macam Sakai (I have seen these outsiders teasing Orang Asli people on Facebook, saying we look like Sakai),”*<sup>49</sup> she said, referring to the teenage children of her own neighbours.

Siti, who is an indigenous woman from the Temuan ethnic group, said the comments do hurt her feelings. She has replied to some of them although for the most part she remained silent. On one occasion she replied to a post and said, *“Orang Asli kacau korang ke? Mintak makan korang ke? (Have the Orang Asli disturbed you? Are they asking for your food?)”* It was her way of asking the people why they pick on Orang Asli when the community has not done anything wrong. Siti said people have a stereotypical view of Orang Asli lifestyle and associate them with poverty and errant behaviour. This perception offends her because in her words, *“Orang Asli sekarang dah moden (Today’s Orang Asli are modern).”* But Siti is also reluctant to express too much on social media and would rather hurt in silence in order to maintain peace and avoid being perceived as a trouble maker.

According to Siti, the attitude among the Orang Asli in her area is to simply let others say whatever they want. It is an approach to life she even teaches her children. She said: *“Apa guna pun kita melawan? Kalau orang berpihak kepada kita, tak apa. Kalau orang tak berpihak kepada kita? (What’s the point in fighting back? It’s okay if people side with us. But*

what if they don’t?)”

In her experience, she has seen others defend Orang Asli people when comments are made about them. But more often than not, the racism outweighs the support.

Siti and Hannah are typical cases of women holding back from expressing their views in order to avoid getting themselves into a potentially hostile situation. Arguably, it is a way of self-preservation but at the same time there is also a sense of disempowerment. Both claim to be exposed to at least some form of violence on social media, but they feel unable to intervene. For Hannah, her PTSD does not permit exposure to aggression without it further affecting her health. In Siti’s case, some of her responses in the interview indicate she may have internalised the historical discrimination against her people. And while she is proud to identify as Orang Asli, she may not feel safe to defend them when they are discriminated against in a public forum.

## CONTENTION BETWEEN ‘PEOPLE LIKE US’

The cases discussed in this study thus far involve women confronting violent patriarchal behaviours that impact their freedom of expression and participation on social media. The perpetrators are largely men or misogynists. During the process of interviews, however, at least two women talked about their experience of harassment involving other women. What is unique about their stories is that the encounters happen within closed-groups created specifically to provide safety and solidarity for queer women. The women have two intersecting identities they share with their harassers: gender and sexuality. Both are identities that already suffer from patriarchal attitudes under the patriarchal-feudalistic system in Malaysia.

Leslie referred to a photo she shared on Facebook of her carrying the LGBT pride flag at a *Bersih*<sup>50</sup> rally for free and fair elections in 2016. The photo was uploaded onto a personal Facebook account she created specifically to engage with LGBT people in the country whom she hopes she can mobilise on gender or sexuality issues, or seek support from in times of need. Her networks on that account are mostly lesbian women, many of whom she does not

49 Sakai is an indigenous ethnic group whose name is sometimes used as a racist slur to insult someone on their appearance, usually to mean ugly or unkempt.

50 A peaceful assembly held on 19 November 2016 in Kuala Lumpur in response to the ongoing corruption scandal involving the Prime Minister.

know personally. She was flooded with comments when she shared the photo of her carrying the flag at the rally.

“*Bersih* is not for rainbow,” she said, referring to the general sentiment of those who commented on her Facebook. For context, the *Bersih* rally, organised by the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, or more widely known as BERSIH 2.0, is a coalition of non-governmental organisations which seeks to reform the current electoral system in Malaysia to ensure free, clean and fair elections. BERSIH 2.0 has organised some of Malaysia’s largest public rallies and have faced violent opposition by the government. The stakes are high each time they mobilise civil society. To discredit them, the government has accused *Bersih* of being foreign agents trying to cause instability in the country. Government supporters on social media will look for any “evidence” that can be used against them, including signs of “liberalism” which is a term the government uses on those they claim to have an anti-Islam agenda. There was fear among *Bersih* supporters that the proud presence of LGBTs may be used against *Bersih*.

Leslie, who also shared the photo in an LGBT Facebook group, was harshly criticised for her action. She received one comment after another of people saying the same thing, that she should not have brought the flag to the rally. When asked how she felt, Leslie said, “I was speechless! I was upset that the LGBT community was not standing up for themselves.” “LGBT people also pay tax,” she said, “so why can’t I represent myself there?” The comments were unceasing and where she was unable to respond, Leslie tagged her friends so they could help respond on her behalf. It was an important conversation she wanted to have, but it felt like she was being bullied.

In a separate incident, Faye recalled being harassed by members of a lesbian group she started a number of years ago. While she is the group’s sole administrator, she described her role as being mostly hands-off and allowed members to share their own content. Much of the content is about lesbian pop culture with not many deep discussions on lesbianism or lesbian life in Malaysia. Faye admitted some of the content shared by members are “suspect” and “not feminist”, but she did not regulate the information shared or intervene in the conversations. Over time, a few members became the voice of the group by virtue of how frequent they share content or comments there. Their active participations therefore influenced the content and politics of the group itself.

A few months before the interview, someone posted a photo of an advertisement that said women do not only have vaginas but also brains. The person who shared the post thought it was humorous but the few active members felt it was transphobic. A heated discussion ensued between members and Faye was subsequently tagged in a comment and urged to take action, which was something that had never happened in the years since she started the group. She asked on the comments thread what exactly they wanted her to do and that sparked “a land mine that became a mess.” As the group’s administrator, she was personally accused of transphobia and cisgender sexism for not immediately removing the post. They considered it hate speech and wanted her to take action. When she said the group needed to discuss if the content was indeed transphobic, she was then accused of enabling transphobia.

Faye said in the interview, “You have to understand the context of the group. It is mainly used by lesbians and lesbian-identified women for a lot of reasons. There are transpeople in the group but I don’t think there are many.” The unabating exchange continued to a point where Faye felt overwhelmed and needed time-out. She subsequently suspended the group using Facebook’s Archive feature which meant the group and its content was visible to members, but no one could post new content or comments. She did not completely delete the group as she wanted people to be able to read the comments and understand what was happening in the discussion. The group was reactivated after a few days.

These are cases of two respondents who felt they experienced online harassment within their safe networks of marginalised women. The incidents arose not out of ill-intent but concern for others who are also marginalised. However, the cases reflect attitudes where people are unable to have constructive discussions about differences. Importantly, they reveal a behaviour on social media where people believe it is acceptable to bombard an individual with repeated criticism in order to prove a point or achieve a desired outcome.

## THE PRICE OF VISIBILITY

One incident that took Malaysian Twitter by storm earlier this year was related to a peaceful rally on International Women’s Day which saw a group of about fifty young people taking the streets of Kuala Lumpur armed with slogans championing a range of issues affecting women in Malaysia. Photos of

rally-goers carrying their placards were shared on social media in real time and quickly generated public interest. The exposure of the event on Twitter soon became far greater than the actual reach of the event on-ground, and the feedback was harsh.<sup>51</sup> While many did express their support, many others condemned the event, the participants and the messages they carried. Their photos were used against them to hurl insults and individual participants were identified along with their social media accounts, which were then pounded with misogynistic attacks. The harassment went on throughout the day.

One participant, a 16-year-old girl, found out about the Twitter attacks when friends notified her about it. She then saw what was happening online, and what was said about her personally, and the young girl felt it was all too much for her to take in. She was harassed over a photo of her holding a placard that read: "I wish to be the next Prime Minister but I can't. Do you know why? '*Mana tudung???*' (*Where's your hijab???*)"<sup>52</sup> Her message was seen as a swipe on Muslim men who police Muslim women and girls on the internet, especially those who do not don the *hijab*. There have been countless cases of *hijab*-related harassment in Malaysia targeting women from all walks of life. Even royalties are not spared. Tunku Amina, the eldest daughter of the Sultan of Johor, was harassed on her Instagram for the same reason. Unwilling to endure further harassment, the princess deactivated her account.<sup>53</sup>

The backlash against the young girl's placard was ironic to say the least, as many agreed with her message. There were also those who said the young girl cannot become the country's leader, even if she does one day wear the *hijab*, simply because she is a female. The barrage of comments about her photo left the young girl feeling battered and defenceless. At the time, she did not feel she could seek help from her parents for fear of repercussion. Instead, she reached out to a Malaysian feminist group on Facebook for advice. That one connection

on Facebook not only lead her to receive the initial help and support she needed, but also precipitated a series of communications between feminists and women's rights organisations who then organised a pushback campaign on Twitter—where all hell had broken loose.<sup>54</sup> Like Tunku Amina, the young girl paid a high price for having visibility online. She too retreated from her social media platforms, but only temporarily until the situation subsided.

Daphne Iking is no stranger to the challenges of being a visible woman on social media. She is visible by virtue of her work as a professional presenter and needs to maintain that visibility to sustain her work. Her experience in television programmes made her a celebrity, and with that came a lot of attention on her personal life. The divorce of her marriage in 2009 not only made news but brought about a vicious round of rumours which took a few years to fizzle down. "When I went through a very public divorce, [the harassers] went after me," she said. People would leave hurtful comments on unrelated social media posts. For example, on a post in support of an anti-violence against women campaign, she would find comments such as: "*Ala, you're a home wrecker, apa nak tolong-tolong orang pulak!* (Oh please, you're a home wrecker, why would you help others!)"

After the divorce, Daphne decided to embrace Islam and she also married a Muslim. She disclosed in the interview that her decision to embrace Islam was separate from her decision to marry. Her husband and her had a choice to continue the relationship without entering into a marriage, so her decision to be Muslim was not a factor in their relationship. That said, when news got out that she had become Muslim and married a Muslim man, Daphne received comments such as, "*Dia tu Muslim nama je sebab nak kahwin* (She is only Muslim on paper because she wants to get married). The comments refer to the Islamic Family Law Act that necessitates both parties to be Muslim for their marriage to be legally recognised. "At first I felt I needed to explain [my decision about Islam], and I did, but then I thought, 'Why do I need to justify this?'" She also received many "well intended" comments from Muslims who congratulated her, but then proceeded to ask what her adoptive Muslim name was and if she had converted her child from her first marriage. To Daphne, these were all very

51 Anis Khalila, "Perarakan #WomensMarchKL Dikecam Orang Ramai Dan Dikatakan Mengikut Budaya Barat," *Says.com*, March 14, 2017, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://says.com/my/seismik/sempena-hari-wanita-sedunia>.

52 Hijab" refers to a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women. Many Muslims believe the religion instructs Muslim women to wear the hijab when in public, around men who are not their immediate family or around non-Muslims.

53 Mohd Farhaan Shah, "Johor princess quits Instagram," *The Star Online*, October 1, 2015, accessed June 19, 2017, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/10/01/johor-princess-quits-instagram-negative-tudung-remarks-prompt-move/>.

54 Verinia Khoo, "Women's March KL receives backlash, some Malaysians think it's a Western trend," *Elle Malaysia*, March 13, 2017, accessed Jun 19, 2017, <http://www.elle.my/life-and-love/News/Womens-March-KL-receives-backlash-Malaysians-think-its-a-Western-trend>.

presumptuous questions and about things that are extremely private. All of it combined beleaguered her.

Like many other Muslim women, she also faced repeated questions about why she does not wear the *hijab*—a question that continues to perplex the 39-year-old ethnic Kadazan. Besides her marriage and the way she presents herself as a Muslim woman, people on social media also attack her on other parts of her personal life. For instance, Daphne, who was born Christian, would post greetings on social media during Christmas. Each year, there would be comments saying she should not wish “Merry Christmas” as she is now a Muslim. And when she shared updates about Christmas festivities with her Christian family members, there will be those who said it is wrong for Muslims to celebrate Christmas. All these comments were directed to her on Instagram and Facebook. She said it does bother her greatly and the only thing she can do without resorting to deactivating her account, is to block the harassers. But when things get too overwhelming, Daphne would temporarily set her account on private.

The first time she was viciously harassed, Nalisa Alia Amin panicked and almost deactivated her social media accounts. It all started with a photo from a private party where she was seen wearing a large sweater and eating a burger. The photo was discovered by a group of harassers through a mutual connection on their network and then widely circulated along with fat-shaming comments. Nalisa is a plus-size young woman who for many years avoided posting full-bodied photo of herself on social media. “I’ve always had body issues,” she said in the interview, “and I only took photos of my face.” So it affected her deeply when the photo from the party made its rounds. Nalisa, like Daphne and Shida Amal, has a Twitter following of more than 10 thousand people, rendering her a highly visible woman among Malaysians on the platform. The thought of the photo being seen by so many people made her feel really low. It did not help that the harassers were using the photo to insult her body.

Others joined in on the harassment. Not only was she receiving insults on Twitter, she was also seeing them on her Instagram. “*Oh, muka kecil tapi gemok* (Oh, your face is small but you’re actually fat),” they would say. She then discovered the group had assigned her an insulting nickname. Things were said about her without tagging or mentioning her real name, but followers quickly recognised that the insults were directed at her. What saved Nalisa was the affirming feedback she received from other women. She said

many among her followers stood up for her. Nalisa believes that her large following has to do with the fact that she often pushes back against sexism. “I feel like I have nothing to lose. Women are frustrated [with inequality] and if men don’t like me on Twitter [for speaking up], I don’t care.” She said many women like that she stands up to sexist men particularly, and it could be because they do not feel they can do the same. Nalisa believes that when these women do not feel they can use their own voices, they would simply retweet her. She does worry about backlash but is nonetheless determined to speak up.

So when she was attacked for her body and feeling dispirited, women in her network stood up for her. Following the whole incident, Nalisa learnt to accept her body and in fact used social media to connect with other plus-size women who are body positive. She empowered herself through social media networks and today is a strong advocate for body positivity. She has also reclaimed her online space and now proudly shares full photos of herself, which consequently devalues and defuses the insults hurled by her harassers.

Maimuna Zikri, a Malaysian working abroad, wanted to be more visible about her life as a queer woman and ended up paying a steep price for it. Maimuna is for the time being in a long-distance relationship with her partner and children. She is open about her sexuality and relationship on Twitter, so it felt natural for her to share news of her marriage on the platform. Unfortunately, the announcement and photo updates of their wedding, which took place overseas, attracted a lot of attention back home in Malaysia’s Twittersphere. While she did not receive any threats, Maimuna said many felt the need to flood her with their unsolicited “advice” on how to be a proper Muslim. Both Maimuna and her partner are Muslims and the wedding photos clearly showed her partner in a *hijab*. Some people said they “*memalukan Islam* (embarrass Islam)” and one commenter remarked, “*Kau lesbian tu satu hal la, tapi kenapa pakai tudung* (It’s one thing that you’re lesbian, but why do you have to wear the *hijab*)?”

Uncharacteristically, Maimuna was the only respondent who encountered comments where harassers objected to a Muslim woman wearing a *hijab*, and it is because the woman was in a same-sex marriage. In retrospect, she said the reactions would have been slightly different if she had not shared the photos. “It was the photos that got people riled up. If neither of us wore the *hijab*, it would still have been controversial, but not vicious,” she said. She believes

that people were angry because her partner, who had made the “right” decision to don the *hijab*, had also made the “grave mistake” of living a queer life. For Maimuna, it was an important event in her life which she wanted to celebrate openly on her Twitter account. She thought, “*Okay, orang lain kahwin pun share gambar* (when other people get married, they share their wedding photos). Is it a big deal if I shared my photos too?” Maimuna found out the hard way. With a tinge of regret, she said the photos could have been taken more discreetly as not to show her partner’s *hijab*.

“I still have conflicting opinions about it,” she said, “because on the one hand I don’t like my privacy infringed and having strangers give their unsolicited opinions about me. But at the same time, I also feel it should not be a big deal.” Things became more complicated when her colleagues in Malaysia saw the wedding photos and shared it with others in the Malaysian office. Maimuna said she was “out” with some of her colleagues, but not yet with others. The circulation of her photos among colleagues made her feel as though people were doing the coming-out for her, which was something she did not like. Over and above that, she worried that her marriage announcement may impact the status of her employment. After all, even though she is working abroad, she is working for a Malaysian company. And while the company itself may not have explicit policies about same-sex marriages, the country does. The incident left Maimuna feeling very anxious about losing her job.

Unfortunately, that was not the first or only time Maimuna experienced harassment. In 2014, Maimuna and her partner participated in an international photography project documenting lives of LGBT people. They were photographed in their home in Malaysia and the photo was published on a specially created website for the project. Maimuna said a Qur’anic verse framed on their wall was visible in the photo and it caused outrage. “*Kenapa ada ayat Qur’an kat belakang* (Why is there a Qur’anic verse in the background!)” said one commenter. Maimuna was boggled by the reactions she received. “*Macam biasalah, semua rumah ada ayat Qur’an* (It’s normal, all homes have such Qur’anic verses),” she said in the interview, referring to the decor of many Muslim homes in Malaysia. Once again, this is an example of people objecting to Islamic religious symbols present and normalised in a queer environment. “*Macam mana orang Islam, tapi gay* (How is it that they’re Muslims, but gay)?” said another commenter. The backlash was serious, and Maimuna acted on advice

of a friend and requested for the photo to be removed from the project’s website.

The worst case of harassment however happened in 2013 when Maimuna spent a week as the personality behind a local curated Twitter account. She was threatened with rape when she openly spoke about being a queer woman. Interestingly, the anger among those who were harassing her raged when she started to retweet their comments, making them visible to thousands of the account’s followers. Many who saw the violent comments stepped in and confronted the individuals. This caused Maimuna to receive even more violent reactions from them. When asked how she felt, Maimuna said, “I felt upset mostly. I deal with rejection on a daily basis and it affects me to a certain level. But it’s a different feeling when so many hit you at the same time.” She said, these days, she is mostly afraid of being physically attacked since she has been quite visible online.

Rihanna has similar fears. Rihanna, who is a transwoman, is more careful today with whom she communicates on social media and generally avoids engaging with men. She said men feel they have the right to send private messages to “get to know her better.” But when she ignored the messages, they tend to get upset. “There’s that power dynamic, you know. I’m just terrified of guys,” she added. If they identified her as a transwoman, she then gets harassed even more. Based on her experience, Rihanna said she has grown to fear men on social media “because they’re violent and the state empowers them to be so.” She referred to cases of transwomen in Malaysia being attacked by law enforcement and religious officers. She added, “I know I’m not Muslim, but [even non-Muslim] transwomen do get charged and sent to prison where they even get raped.” While Rihanna presents herself as a woman on her social media, it is not an identity that she announces. So while she feels relatively free to simply be herself online, she is also very careful and concerned. Rihanna said she has multiple identities that put her at risk, such as being transgender, a woman, Wiccan<sup>55</sup> and living with a mental health condition.

She recalled a recent case on Facebook where a foreigner had created a travel video about Malaysia depicting the country in a way Rihanna felt was rather stereotypical. She left a long comment on the video to say Malaysia is more than just its forests and beaches, and that it is rich with other kinds

<sup>55</sup> “Wicca” is a modern form of witchcraft practised as a religion, according to the online Oxford Dictionaries.

of heritage and history. As a result, Rihanna was attacked by fellow Malaysians. While the debate was going on, one person suddenly found it appropriate to compliment her looks by saying she is pretty. From there, others began to click on her profile and browse her past posts where Rihanna said she still had photos of her living as a boy. People then started to say things like “Oh, it’s a dude!” and words like “tranny” and “shemale” were used to describe her on the video’s comments thread. “It was triggering and I’m not going to lie, I cried,” said the 22-year-old. “I tried to ignore the things said about me and kept talking about the video, but people were more interested to say very personal stuff,” she added.

After a few days, Rihanna decided to delete her Facebook account. She said she had the account since she was about 14 years old and there were many old photos of her on it. Until the incident, she did not mind people knowing she once lived as a boy. But when people on the video comments thread used transphobic words to insult her, Rihanna decided it was too daunting a task to hide her entire visual history and so she deleted the account entirely. Unfortunately, the incident was also not the first time she experienced harassment. As a teenager who experienced violence at home, she took to social media for relief and to unload her emotions. However, her actions were met with condemnation by many who felt she should not speak ill of her family on such a public platform. So, for Rihanna, online violence is a lived reality whether living as a boy or as a young woman.

One respondent however, has gone out of her way to ensure her visibility is contained within a carefully selected network of friends. Venita does not even use her real name on social media. She is quite concerned about being stalked by unknown men even though she has never experienced it before. Additionally, as someone who does a lot of community work, Venita, who is Temuan, also feels having an online nickname helps protect her from politically motivated surveillance. Having put in so much care in shaping her social network, she felt more comfortable posting regular updates about her activities. However, concerning one particular photo of her doing a community project, Venita received private messages from a particular Facebook friend who criticised her for her involvement in Orang Asli community work.

She described the frequency of messages coming in as “*bertubi-tubi*” (one after the another), all expressing disapproval of her activism. One message

said, “*Belajar tinggi-tinggi tak guna kalau kerja hanya jadi aktivis* (There is no point of having a higher education if you’re just going to be an activist).” Other messages were not so civil, she said. Venita said he also used “very harsh language” in his criticism. It came to a point where she could no longer take his bombardment, and so she blocked him. But the 24-year-old then realised that they had many mutual friends on their network and she felt insecure that perhaps they might be surveilling her Facebook page on his behalf. Not too long after the incident, Venita decided to deactivate her account. That was the first time she experienced harassment on social media, which transpired via private direct messaging on Facebook. Asked how she felt about the incident, Venita said she felt disappointed as she hoped Orang Asli youth would support community actions but instead she discovered not only were some of them unsupportive, but would even resort to aggression.

The cases above show how the visibility of women’s physicality on social media can also lead to bullying and harassment. On the one hand, there are cases where photos shared in good faith are used as material to perpetuate vicious attacks. And then there are photos shared privately which are then brought into a more public sphere to defame and insult. In other cases, even the visibility of a profile photo can lead to other visual histories that are then used for abuse. Women are objectified and their personal lives are judged based on what people literally see of them. In all of the cases above, the women are made to feel vulnerable and ostracised for being themselves. These are not “scandalous” photos, rather photos of women simply living their lives—whether at a party, a community event or at their own wedding.

## VICIOUS TACTICS TO SILENCE WOMEN

There is no set definition for technology-related bullying and harassment, but both are generally understood to mean the same thing. Bullying is usually applied in cases between minors, while harassment is applied when it involves adults. It typically refers to the willful use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for repeated “attempts to target a specific person by directly contacting them, or indirectly using or disseminating their personal information, causing them distress, fear or anger.” The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for England and Wales also recognises “collective harassment,” to mean harassment directed at members of a particular

group, including groups of a specific identity such as ethnicity, sexuality, disability or those engaged in a specific trade or profession. By this definition, it can be said that the earlier mentioned case of Siti encountering racist comments about the Orang Asli is a form of collective harassment. While the comments were not directed at her, they are about Orang Asli people—of which she is one—and specifically the Orang Asli in her neighbourhood. Naturally, Siti would feel affected when exposed to such comments.

Stories collected in this study suggest that some members of Malaysian society have the intent to harm, and actively pursue this path. Whether the same people behave in the same hostile way towards others when it comes to face-to-face interactions remains questionable. Distinction has to be drawn between the primary perpetrator(s) and secondary perpetrators:

Firstly, the person initiating the violence, namely the author, or the person who first uploads the offending data or images. This is the primary perpetrator. Secondly, the person who purposefully, recklessly or negligently downloads, forwards, or shares the offending data or images.<sup>56</sup>

In most of the cases, the bullying and harassment started with one or a group of primary perpetrators who generated the offending data or image. In Rihanna's case where she was hurled all sorts of transphobic terms, the harassers did intend to hurt her. It was a misogynistic attack on her identity as a transwoman. Likewise, the case of Yvonne Lam, who was targeted by members and friends of the blog she called-out for their sexist article, and Daphne Iking, when she was going through a very public divorce. Daphne, Maryam Lee and Maimuna Zikri's harassers opposed their lifestyle as Muslims and intended for the women to know about it. Similarly, Venita's harasser opposed her community work and wanted her to know his views by flooding her with criticism via private messaging. The attack on Idora on the Orang Asli Facebook community group was also deliberate to paint her as an outcast. In the cases of Nalisa Alia Amin, Shida Amal, and Yara Khoo, the intent was undeniable. People organised themselves and executed what appeared to be well thought-out attacks on the women.

<sup>56</sup> "Due diligence and accountability for online violence against women", *Association for Progressive Communications*, accessed August 2, 2017, <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/DueDiligenceAndAccountabilityForOnlineVAW.pdf>.

What about the individual cases of Faye and Leslie who felt harassed by fellow queer women in wanting to protect a third party already at risk? This study finds that the repeated engagement with Faye and Leslie in a hostile manner in order to achieve a particular outcome, or win an argument, indicates intention to harass. Based on the women's accounts of their experiences, not only were they outnumbered, the situation also would not have subsided unless they themselves retreated. The same can be said of the "well-intended" people who harassed Daphne, Maimuna and Maryam with their unsolicited "advice" on how Muslim women should behave, present themselves and live their lives. Some of the harassers clearly felt religiously and morally obliged to impart their advice in order to "save" the women, lending to the larger inclinations of a patriarchal society that seek to "rescue" and "protect" women while simultaneously discouraging their self-empowerment and self-determination.

The bullying and harassment were then amplified by the secondary perpetrators who do not generate or produce any content, but took part by re-tweeting, downloading, forwarding, liking, sharing – all of which intensified the traumatic experience for the women. In these cases, intent, or more specifically, lack of intent, can be a challenge in holding secondary perpetrators accountable. Still, the legal system has long established that a person can be held liable despite the lack of intent to perpetrate harm. For instance, in the civil realm, the tort of negligence requires a person to exercise reasonable standard of care for the safety and wellbeing of those around you. A person who is negligent, who does not have the intention to deliberately cause harm, is responsible nonetheless because his or her careless actions result in harm for someone. Ignorance of the identity of the women or the malicious intention to cause harm, does not make the pain any less real or the negative experience any more bearable for the women. It is not unreasonable to expect that we exercise sensibility and due standard of care towards one another.

The study also identifies two ways the women were harassed. The first is by individuals acting on their own accord without conscious coordination with others. Based on their interviews, most of the women were harassed in this manner. The second is organised harassment. Nalisa, Shida, Maryam and Yara were four respondents who were attacked in a coordinated manner by a group of people. The women were also aware of the coordinated attacks on them. In Yara's case, she believes that the cybertroopers were acting on behalf of the ruling party in government. She

also believes that cybertroopers on social media are salaried to target people like her.

Some of the harassers are likely to be guilty of stalking. The cases of organised harassment would have required a considerable amount of stalking in order for the women to be attacked the way they were. In the case of Nalisa for example, her harassers would have had to stalk others in her close social networks in order to have access to the photo of her at the party. The nature of social media where people's interactions and relationships can be linked, captured and traced, facilitates stalking activities. Stalking, however, is not an activity that is always visible to the women being stalked, and for most of these women who already have very visible footprints online, it may well be too difficult and too late to remove these traces except to be more vigilant about what they share online and with whom, or to increase their visibility even further.

Most of the bullying and harassment cases in this study occurred on comments threads, either on the women's posts or on others. These threads could be linked to a text, photo or video post. Only few received harassment via private messaging. Comments made on threads are more visible to others, which could encourage more people to participate in the harassment. Participation may not necessarily be in the form of comments but "gestured" reactions to existing comments. For instance, when people 'like' someone's comment. When there are many 'likes' on a harasser's comment, the women in all likelihood will receive such responses as a reinforcement of the harassment. Personal information shared on a thread also means that the information becomes accessible to others. In Rihanna's case, she was "outed" as a transwoman on a thread which led others to make transphobic comments about her.

Often, the harassment dispersed onto other channels. For example, in Yvonne's case where people started talking about her on their own pages without tagging her. This is also something Maryam had experienced. Nalisa's harassers even came up with a nickname as they continued to shame her. When this happened, the women were not notified, unless someone personally informed them about it. The intention to harm still exists, as this can mean that the attacks perpetuate without any form of defence on behalf of the victim, and it also means that the victim herself is unable to defend herself, an intended "crippling" effect. Another way of excluding the target from the harassment thread was by screen shots. Content by the women was screen-shot and

then shared separately with the harassers' own comments attached.

Another tactic is the acquisition and publication of photos without the women's consent. Idora, Nalisa and Shida are among those whose photos were shared without their consent. Idora's photo was taken from her Facebook account by someone in her network and then republished in a group by the same perpetrator. Nalisa's photo was acquired from an account belonging to someone in her network and then shared publicly by the group of harassers. Shida was betrayed by her own friend who provided the group of harassers with private photos of her.

Numbers matter. The more friends or followers a person has, the more visible the post becomes. The way visibility works may differ on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter—the most cited social media in this study. Facebook, for example, employs an algorithm system that prioritises popular content over others. The more people engage with a particular type of content or post, the more Facebook will promote it in the News Feed.<sup>57</sup> On Twitter, a person who is tagged on a tweet may be made visible even to those who are not following her. Similarly, a tweet that is liked may be visible to others. Twitter, however, for the most part flows its content in real time, but this is also fast changing, with Twitter becoming more inclined to practices adopted by Facebook.<sup>58</sup> Retweets and quote Tweets are also ways where harassers draw attention to the women. If the harassers themselves have large followings, then it becomes even more visible to others.

<sup>57</sup> "The stories that show in your News Feed are influenced by your connections and activity on Facebook. This helps you to see more stories that interest you from friends you interact with the most. The number of comments and likes a post receives and what kind of story it is (ex: photo, video, status update) can also make it more likely to appear in your News Feed." - an excerpt from Facebook on "How News Feed Works", accessed September 1, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/help/327131014036297/>

<sup>58</sup> "Twitter News' Order", *Slate*, accessed September 1, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/cover\\_story/2017/03/twitter\\_s\\_timeline\\_algorithm\\_and\\_its\\_effect\\_on\\_us\\_explained.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/cover_story/2017/03/twitter_s_timeline_algorithm_and_its_effect_on_us_explained.html)



# APPRAISING REDORESS

Social media has given women greater access to their freedom of expression and opportunities to enrich their lives with useful information and meaningful relationships. It provides visibility to women, a level of visibility that is not always enjoyed in the offline world. And where women feel isolated offline, they find association online. This is most clear among the queer women interviewed in this study. Social media has also enabled self-employed women to promote their work and make a living. At the same time, and to a considerable extent, social media also allows women to shape their own networks. They can choose to limit the size of their network or expand it to create a wider public sphere. Nevertheless, no matter how they try to shape their social media spaces and manage their interactions with others, the women still risk being exposed to violence, either as a witness to others' experiences of violence or in experiencing it themselves. Both have a negative and lasting impact on their social media experience.

This study has shown how having voice and visibility on social media can bring about some of the most traumatic experiences for women. The internet provides a fertile ground that amplifies the reach of bullies and harassers. While the bullying and harassment is transmitted digitally, they are received and experienced bodily with the same effect that anyone would have in the physical world. The cases also show the varied tactics employed and sometimes in the most deliberate and insidious ways. As demonstrated by some of these case studies, the perpetrators can be much more cruel with their words than in face-to-face encounters. From fat shaming to rape and death threats, the extreme extent of bullying and harassment were recounted by women in this study, with one having to urgently seek psychological help. This study shows that women, in all diversity, bear the brunt of Malaysia's patriarchal interpretation of moral norms, culture and religion. Women who exercise agency and power on social media are deemed to have transgressed morally, culturally and religiously of what is touted to be appropriate behaviour for women and girls.

The 2015 outcome document for Internet Governance Forum (IGF): Best Practice Forum on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women highlighted that "tensions around multiple rights are often raised in discussions to address abuse of women and gendered violence against women

online."<sup>59</sup> Eight of the fifteen women in this study have either logged out for a period of time, temporarily deactivated or completely deleted their platform as a result of bullying and harassment. Two others had considered to do the same. Clearly, the violence has direct and negative impacts on their freedom of expression and participation online when women feel that they need to leave a space due to violence. Additionally, when women see the impunity with which violence is perpetrated against other women on social media, they may also refrain from expressing themselves or avoid being too visible. It is important to balance multiple rights, including right to participate in public life, freedom of expression, safety, bodily autonomy and privacy; and to take into account the context in which these rights are recognized and protected:

However, the fact that online abuse and gender-based violence acts to impede women's right to freedom of expression by creating environments in which they do not feel safe to express themselves needs to be included in these debates. Many forms of online abuse, like gender-based hate speech, for example, chill women's online interaction by compelling them to self-censor or refrain from using certain platforms where they might be susceptible to online abuse.<sup>60</sup>

What is extremely important to keep in mind is that the emotional and psychological impact on the women does not disappear upon exiting the platform. It is an experience of bodied individuals, and will therefore have a lasting effect on them beyond the internet. Shida Amal's case of having to be admitted into hospital for a week is a prime example of how technology-related gender-based violence affects lives offline. Maimuna Zikri's fear of one day being physically assaulted for being openly queer on social media is yet another example.

59 "Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2015: Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women", *Internet Governance Forum*, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://intgovforum.org/cms/documents/best-practice-forums/623-bpf-online-abuse-and-gbv-against-women/file>.

60 "Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2015: Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women", *Internet Governance Forum*, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://intgovforum.org/cms/documents/best-practice-forums/623-bpf-online-abuse-and-gbv-against-women/file>.

When asked how she overcame her experience of being bullied and harassed through the years, Yvonne Lam said, “I’ve been subjected to them so many times that I’ve built a mechanism to forget them when they happen. The mechanism is defensive. Some choose to leave the platform, but I can’t because I do social media managing, so I learnt to ignore it.” This is not a solution. Women should not have to bear the brunt of attacks to begin with. They should not have to feel unsafe and suffer alone. And they should not have to teach themselves to be numb to violence, because violence is not normal, and should not ever be normalised. The respondents in this study however feel there is nothing much they can do other than to take minor actions on their side.

## PLATFORM OWNERS

No matter how public a social media space, the general perception is that it is a “private space” by virtue of it being owned by private corporations within a free market system. The corporations therefore determine the rules of engagement and play a role as the arbiter of conflict. The most popular social media <sup>61</sup> among the women in this study all have internal reporting systems where people can report harassers to the platform owners for them to take action. However, the standards differ between the platforms. All the women interviewed are aware of this internal reporting mechanism but few actually use it to report harassers. Instead, the women “unfriend” or block them. This however does not solve their problem because mutual connections may allow the harasser to still gain access to the women or view their content. Blocking is only effective when they do not have mutual contacts. Daphne Iking was the only respondent who feels confident that her reports to platform owners bear results, although she is unsure if any action was actually taken by the platform owners.

In 2015, Facebook’s Community Operations team spoke to The Independent, a United Kingdom-based online newspaper, on how much they have improved in managing abuse on platform and went out of their way to disclose that each report is reviewed by a human being, and not a computer system as many believed. A media exposé of Facebook’s internal guidelines this year, however, reveal a lack of understanding on the experiences of people who face violence. A total of 23 civil society and activists

from different part of the world responded to the exposé as follows:

The details of Facebook’s content moderation corroborate precisely what women – be they cis het, LGBTQI – and gender-nonconforming people tell us they experience on the platform. Abuse, particularly nonconsensual image sharing, is rampant, and reports are often rejected with an explanation that the abuse did not violate Facebook’s community guidelines even though these leaked documents show they are clear violations. For many users, this is tantamount to being told the abuse experienced did not take place.<sup>62</sup>

The same concerns apply to other social media including Instagram, which Facebook owns, and Twitter. The respondents of this study who do report harassers on Twitter do so as a matter of principle and action. As Rihanna said in her interview, “every small action counts.” But Rihanna herself does not think enough is done by the platform owner to stop the harassers. There are also concerns that only certain offending posts are asked to be removed, which does not quite end the harassment itself. Posts in local or colloquial language may also escape the censors. Some of the women said bullies and harassers should be removed from the platform completely.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Daphne was the only respondent whose report to government agencies resulted in action. However, the case concerned a Malaysian blog that contained child pornography, and had no relation to the harassment she had personally faced. Despite the fact that such a blog violate the rights of the child, and Malaysia has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Daphne had to go through a “tedious” process with the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) which finally led to the blog being taken down. Daphne’s experience points to how difficult it is to address human rights

61 Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

62 “Joint Statement on Facebook Internal Guidelines for Content Moderation”, *Take Back the Tech*, accessed September 6, 2017, <https://www.takebackthetech.net/news/joint-statement-facebooks-internal-guidelines-content-moderation>

violations online even though it affects the well-being of children, universally accepted as morally wrong.

Shida's experience with law enforcers was the total opposite. Shida went to the police when she received a comment on social media that said, "*Shida ni patut kena rogol je* (Shida should just be raped)." Instead of investigating the case and taking action against the threat, the police told her there was nothing they could do. They said if she was bothered by the threat, she should delete her account.

Besides Daphne and Shida, the other women have never taken their cases to law enforcement or government agencies. Stories from others who seek help from state agencies on matters concerning gender-based violence, whether it is online or offline, have caused women in Malaysia to feel discouraged from doing the same. Like Shida, women are often turned away, causing them to feel that the state will not protect them from harm. This is especially so if the incident is a "mere" threat on the elusive, not-real space called the internet. There may also be the arguably faulty perception by law enforcers and government agencies that the threat or danger is not imminent.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Malaysian laws are far from adequate to protect women from all the various forms of violence. In some cases, the laws do not even exist. In others, the burden is upon women to prove that they have been harmed, with “harm” and the “extent of harm” likely interpreted on the basis of still inadequate laws in Malaysia. What can worsen the situation for women is that some judges may adopt a sexist and patriarchal lens when it comes to women’s testimonies and voices. A study by Women’s Centre for Change (WCC) reveals that the “culture of skepticism” is still present in the Malaysia’s criminal justice system, where “victims [of sexual assault and rape] can be viewed with suspicion at any juncture of the criminal justice system. In the courtroom, the centre of attention is again on the victim’s credibility, and the defence arguments are likely to focus on reasons why this credibility should be questioned.”<sup>63</sup> Where might Nalisa Alia Amin and Shida Amal find justice for the fat-shaming public torment they faced, when the dominant narrative in pop culture normalises “pretty skinny” as the standard of beauty? Or Rihanna, for the transphobic comments she received, like getting called a “shemale”, when Malaysian laws and the larger society adopts a binary understanding of sex and gender? In fact, Rihanna risks being dragged to the Islamic religious court for being transwoman, and in effect, does not enjoy “equality before the law”, a constitutional guarantee for all Malaysians. Furthermore, making bullies and harassers accountable for their harmful behaviour can be extremely difficult when accounts can be easily deleted, or when they claim that their accounts have been hacked or when they do not use their actual names.

A research by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) on domestic legal redress for cases of technology-related violence against women, found that there is a *culture of impunity* within the legal system, which “raises questions of legitimacy and credibility around the legal system as an institution accountable for violations against women.”<sup>64</sup> From the cases reported, mistrust and lack of confidence among the women towards the criminal justice system form the first barrier in women

seeking legal redress. Even in cases where they do, instances of gender-based violence, more so when it happens online, are often trivialised as “not real”. The perception of gender-based violence as a private act remains prevalent, especially when it happens within private messages or the women’s own social network.

To ensure effective legal redress and access to justice for women in all spheres of life, the government must first recognise gender-based violence as a form of targeted violence that has its roots in discriminatory treatment against women based on their gender. Government must also recognise that gender-based violence online brings about the same, if not greater, harmful effect and impact on women, and perpetrators cannot be allowed such impunity. As a way forward:

Specific laws on online violence as well as specialised mechanisms with trained and skilled personnel are required to confront and eliminate online violence. However, merely criminalising online violence does not provide the remedy required by online violence victims/survivors. Experience has shown that women’s access to justice should be a mix of criminal, civil and administrative processes and include the areas of all the 5 P’s, namely in prevention of online violence, protection of victims/survivors, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators and provision of redress and reparation for the victims/survivors.<sup>65</sup>

The government and lawmakers should consult with relevant civil society groups to ensure existing and proposed laws are in accordance with international human rights standards, to ensure, among other things, women’s freedom of expression and participation online. This should also be the spirit in which laws are then read and implemented by the judiciary.

That said, as it stands, the women interviewed in this study may not even be able to afford pursuing a legal case against their harassers. This is thus another aspect of justice to consider; that justice is expensive. Economic consideration poses a significant barrier to women’s access to justice. Getting access to a

63 “Seeking A Better Judicial Process for Sexual Crimes. Background Paper for Dialogue with Penang Judiciary”, *Women’s Centre for Change*, accessed August 4, 2017, [http://www.wccpenang.org/files/docs/Judiciary\\_Background\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.wccpenang.org/files/docs/Judiciary_Background_Paper.pdf).

64 “From impunity to justice: Domestic legal remedies for cases of technology-related violence against women”, *Association for Progressive Communication*, accessed August 1, 2017, [https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flow\\_domestic\\_legal\\_remedies.pdf](https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flow_domestic_legal_remedies.pdf).

65 “Due diligence and accountability for online violence against women”, *Association for Progressive Communications*, accessed August 2, 2017, <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/DueDiligenceAndAccountabilityForOnlineVAW.pdf>.

legal representative and to the court, which are often located in the capital or larger cities, are costly. The time taken to travel and to go through the long and extensive litigation process translates to loss of work opportunities and income for these women. Even with women who are financially stable, it should not be assumed that they would be able to afford access to justice. The court processes are often tedious, time-consuming and costly to pursue. There is also an inherent risk of “losing the case” and hence having to bear the legal cost of the other party. While the domestic legal system needs reform to uphold and protect women’s human rights online, efforts must also be channeled into making avenues for legal recourse more accessible and affordable to women. This effort should be regarded as a holistic approach towards upholding and protecting women’s human rights in Malaysia.

Social media platform providers are increasingly taking a more proactive role in mediating content hosted on their platforms. The most viable and immediate remedy for women’s grievances on social media lies with platform owners who are responsible for the very space they provide for people to engage with one another. The platform owners are placed in a unique situation where they have the capacity to moderate content, rendering it more cost-effective to seek redress from them, i.e. request to remove a certain violating material. Platform owners must immediately update their community operations protocols and standards to comply with human rights standards and recognise gender-based violence as a form of violence that occur on their platforms on a daily basis. Reports of bullying and harassment must be prioritised for strict and swift action. And in cases where the removal of selected posts does not resolve the problem of harassment, platform owners must recognise that harassment involves repeated actions against a target and consider account termination as a remedy.

All the major platform owners are made aware of recommendations by women’s human rights groups from all over the world when they participate in dialogues such as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and Global Network Initiative (GNI). These are important conversations and must be continued and expanded to include more women from diverse backgrounds, especially women who faced multiple forms of discrimination. Women are the most active social media users and platform owners owe it to them to make social media spaces safe from violence. It is, however, not enough for platform owners alone to secure this safe environment. Other private

sector technology actors must also play their part as stakeholders that makeup the online communications ecosystem. This includes telecommunication companies and internet service providers.

The government, working closely with the private sector and civil society, must look to forming a long-term plan to shape a Malaysian online citizenry that is respectful of human rights. It is time for Malaysia to have rights-based digital literacy programmes in schools as information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become an integral part of young people’s lives. The curriculum must go beyond teaching technical skills to educating young people that girls too must be able to participate in society and make life choices using technology without fear of violence. It is also crucial that content in the curriculum directly addresses issues of bullying and harassment in Malaysia, including that experienced by transgenders and other marginalized groups.

Finally, the Malaysian government should consider that being online is a public good as this relates to access to information and knowledge, and should be provided at minimal cost to all.

The most difficult issue to tackle is the problem that many women in this study face, that is the imposition of religious morality on their lives. This is a problem that the Malaysian government cannot afford to shy away from, and can only be resolved with political will. For as long as the country’s ruling party and its contenders use religion as a vehicle to advance their political agenda, people’s lives will continue to be impacted and women, Muslim and others, will continue to face violence on the internet while perpetrators continue to enjoy their impunity. Civil society must therefore demand the government and political parties to end the politicisation of religion in Malaysia as its effects are felt in all aspects of every day life.





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