

Thinking about Solidarities among Women in Malaysia: Muslim Women's Rights Activism and Muslim Women-Who-Love-Women

Habiba-Mao, UEDA

1 Introduction

Within the context of Malaysia, social issues affecting Muslim women including Muslim Women-Who-Love-Women¹ (here after, 'WWLW') and other sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities have continued to be complicated through the politicization and implementations of Islamic morals and laws. Understanding these barriers contextualized the importance of Muslim women's solidarity and considering how to incorporate Islamic values and morals when addressing Muslim women's social issues. The broad purpose of this research was to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the situations of sexual-and-gender-marginalized groups in Malaysia and to bring attention to the multilayered intersections of female sexuality, religious norms and social values in the context of Malaysia. More specifically, the research explored the situations of Muslim women and WWLW in Malaysia through examining the perspectives of individuals who were aware of and/or involved in activism related to social issues in general affecting Malay Muslim women.

This research looked at the challenges that women's rights groups and sexuality rights activists have been faced with when engaging their work within religious Islamic paradigms. More specifically through the perspectives and ideologies of Sisters in Islam (SIS), the only organization in Malaysia that had developed an agenda of social justice and basic human rights for Muslim women and collaborated with other groups to address sexual diversity issues, this research attempted to understand the situations of why Muslim women including WWLW have faced continued obstacles while trying to gain acceptance in society. Thus, this research

focused on gaining insight into the challenges of not only being a woman in a strongly patriarchal religious, specifically Islamic, society but also the added complexities of being a WWLW in a heteronormative society.

1.1 About This Research

The central research questions of this study were framed in a way to gain more insider knowledge and perspectives within the Muslim women's activism community in Malaysia. The questions were also designed in a way to highlight issues around what it means to be a Muslim woman in Malaysia, and how the current Muslim women's rights movement has been informed and impacted by growing Islamization. Moreover, what this meant ultimately for not just Muslim women in general, but Muslim WWLW in Malaysia.

This research qualitatively explored the perspectives of 14 participants through in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations over a 2-month period between June and July 2013. Gaining emic perspectives through such interviews allowed insider access to the target communities and to understand social issues from those who experienced them firsthand. Initially, target groups of informants were those who were either involved with SIS at the time of the interviews or had been involved in the past. However, in order to gain a richer understanding of specific community issues, the target groups were later expanded to include other sexuality rights activists who were active in a range of diverse support groups for sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the difficulty in identifying participants through a more typical recruitment process, a convenience sample of 9 informants was recruited through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Through my own networking between 2011 and 2013, I came to know 7 of the 14 informants on a

personal level. Through building such relationships, my own personal perspectives came to be strongly informed by the social and cultural situations of these community members.

Each participant signed consent and confidentiality agreement forms before their interviews. They were informed that any information disclosed during the interviews would be protected and that pseudonyms would be used to ensure privacy. All participants received their own copy of the confidentiality agreement forms.

1.2 What Does It Mean to be Malay?

The Malay population is the largest within Malaysia; what it means to “be Malaysian” depends not only on ethnicity and culture, but also religious (i.e. Islamic) beliefs and practices. It is important to note that religion, including Islam, is an identity marker in Malaysia. The Malaysian Federal Constitution defines a Malay person to be one who speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs, and professes to the religion of Islam. Thus, there are definitive relations between the ethnic category of Malay and religious category of Islam. Lee elaborated this point as “when a non-Muslim embraced Islam, that he or she had become Malay rather than having become Muslim” (2011:98). Even though Malays comprises slightly more than half of the total population,² Malay ethnic groups have continued to dominate in Malaysia’s political arena since Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957 (Lee, 2011). It gradually gained more political power with the process of Islamization. Timur described the current tendency of Malaysia as “what we have in Malaysia is actually a process of forced nationalization, a rigid monolithic monoculture nationalism. And religion is one of its most powerful weapons” (“A Malaysian Inquisition?”, 2014). The next section will further discuss how both of the modernization process and Islamization process have impacted the situations of Muslim women in Malaysia.

2 Islamization and Political Context of Malaysia

From all the interviews that were conducted, there was a very strong theme related to the politicization of Islam. Everybody spoke strongly on how Muslim women have continued to face increased discriminatory attitudes and other social barriers under Islamic legislations. According to Sarah, since the 1980s, the Malaysian government began to implement more Islamic morals into their legislatures to build a more modern Islamic country and as a result, "... slowly Islamization became very very strong and as ... in fact, Syariah law is much more than Civil law". Such sentiments were also echoed through other informants that people's attitudes and behaviors had changed especially after the Islamic resurgence emerged in Malaysia in the late 1970s. Jannah, very much like Sarah could feel that Malaysia was progressively becoming more and more conservative and extreme in its religious interpretations compared to previous years due to the politicization of Islam:

... When you look at the trend and change on the Muslim behavior today, as compared to the 70s or early 80s ... the concern is that the Muslim society in Malaysia today, majority ... is more, more and more conservative, and ... extreme in their understanding of Islam as compared to the 60s, 70s and early 80s. And we blame it so much on the politicization of Islam. Because then you know it involves power struggle. And wanting to appear as the upholder of Islam. And who becomes the victims would be those in the lower class society, lower middle class women, children, and sexual minority groups. (Jannah)

According to Jannah, as Islam became more politicized within the context of Malaysia, such strategies were implemented with the goal of making Malaysian society more modernized, while strongly upholding Islam. As a result, as religious authorities had steadily gained more control

over past decades, it was clear to Jannah that such conservative perspectives had contributed to a culture of restricting and denying women's rights access to equal rights, as well as allowing discrimination on a systematic basis against women and other sexual-and-gender-marginalized groups.

Rayhana also shared in her interview that as Malaysian society had become more racially segregated, religious mores were strategically utilized to gain more power to control the Malay Muslim community. Throughout her interview, Rayhana spoke of the generally limited knowledge of Islamic interpretations amongst Malay Muslims and the spread of the notions of Islamization in Malaysia. According to Rayhana, the Islamization process had deepened racial boundaries between Malay and non-Malay, and created more intolerance and hostile attitude towards differences among Malaysians. Thus, anything that did not reflect mainstream Islamic morals was deemed as wrong. In some cases, as Rayhana indicated, such actions were even labeled as "attacks" on these religious morals even though people " ... used to be quite tolerant, but I think increasingly with this Islamization ... becoming more intolerant against differences. Yeah, so whatever they see or deem as 'different' from the mainstream, I think now a bit more ... hostile in certain degrees".

This change towards more extremist interpretations clearly changed people's attitudes and behaviors over the last few decades. According to both Jannah and Sarah, this was especially after the Islamic resurgence which emerged in Malaysia in the late 1970s. Both participants, as well as others indicated clearly that this cultural shift in attitudes towards Islam had direct consequences on Muslim women and their community.

2.2 How Islamization and Moral Policing have Impacted Muslim Women and Muslim WWLW

The issues surrounding Islamization have had direct effects on all Muslim

communities in Malaysia, but especially for women and those living non-heteronormative lifestyles. The legal regulations for Muslims living in Malaysia are considered to be more complicated than those for non-Muslims. This is because Syariah laws are the primary body of control at the state level, except with respect to the Federal Territories. In particular, the socio-political and legal climates are hostile to sexual-and-gender-marginalized individuals. Such hostile environments had gradually built up since the early 1990s during the Mahathir administration (1981-2003), especially when the criminalization of non-normative sexual acts under Syariah Criminal Offences Acts (SCOAs) were slowly introduced and implemented across all states.³

The provisions under SCOAs contained 'personal sins' which when interpreted under traditional jurisprudence were considered as "crimes against the state" and "morally dangerous to society." Jamilah indicated in her interview that SIS identified 50 percent of their cases under SCOAs as issues related to 'moral policing'. Moral policing has had direct consequences for Muslim women in terms of how they were expected to conform to certain "norms" and "standards" that were directed by religious morals. In terms of such "norms," Rayhana shared her slight frustration with making sense of how one would begin to define what is appropriate or not for women:

So how, you know a lot of women wear pants, wear shirts, so how do you define the way they are? How? You know, even mother sometime like wear, you know so it really just ends up harassing you all the time. (Rayhana)

Rayhana pointed out because even mothers wear pants and shirts, i.e. clothing that could be perceived as "un-feminine" according to moral policing standards, it would be extremely difficult to set a general norm

through which all women presented themselves in the same “feminine” way. Instead women would end up receiving more criticisms about their appearance, even when simply wearing shirts and pants. Sheena echoed similar sentiments to Rayhana by questioning how acceptable “norms” for women should be defined to begin with.

[Religious authorities] are just trying to target [girls and women] who dress like boys. They are all girls, all women, regardless of their sexuality, to dress like stereotypical women do, or what is, you know, the accepted gender norm for women in terms of dress code, right? (Sheena)

The idealization of how Muslim women should dress and behave was thus manifested through the religious authorities’ attempt to control women’s bodies through stigmatizing gender non-conforming self-expressions. The implications would affect all Muslim women and how they were expected to conform to heteronormative standards.

An extreme example of moral policing and how it has affected Muslim women came in 2008, when a fatwa⁴ against tomboyism was issued to selectively target and prosecute Muslim women that were considered “not feminine enough” in their appearance (“Fatwa on tomboys”, 2008). The Director General of the National Fatwa Council, Datuk Wan Mohamad Shiekh Abd Aziz clearly stated that the fatwa aimed to “save these women (from becoming lesbians)” (“Malaysia’s fatwa council explains how ‘tomboys’ become lesbians”, 2008), as ‘being lesbian’ could allegedly lead to greater “crimes” such as “indulgence in lesbian sex” (“Malaysian religious council issues ban on lesbian sex”, 2008). It should be noted that although this fatwa did not end up becoming an actual force of the law, it became clear that the fatwa was not just about “lesbian sex”, or “women becoming lesbians” but also had the implicit message of defining what is “acceptable”

for women under the guise of “protecting” religious morals.

Moreover, because the type of awareness created by the media and the government was consistently one-sided and negatively biased, it contributed further to a growing culture that remained unaware of the complexities of Muslim women and WWLW’s sexuality issues within the current social paradigm. The next section will talk about development of Muslim women’s rights activism and discuss how Islamic feminist perspectives have impacted the issues concerning sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities in Malaysia.

3 Islamic Feminism in the Context of Malaysia: Sisters in Islam

Although “feminism” is not a term usually associated within religious discourses, many can argue that SIS is in fact an organization that takes an Islamic feminist approach. Islamic feminists have articulated Muslim women’s issues within an Islamic paradigm. Such approaches were based on progressive interpretations of the Qur’an which raised awareness among women seeking to reclaim Islam and the Qur’an for themselves. In the context of Malaysia, the groundswell of Islamic resurgence resulted in developing political feminist activism in the 1980s. SIS has been one of the foremost Muslim women’s rights groups in Malaysia since 1988. They have focused their work in research, advocacy, and public education to end discrimination against women in the name of Islam. Furthermore, one of SIS’s goals has been to question the “male-biased aspects of the Syariah and to counter patriarchal authority by highlighting the gender-justice essence of the Qur’an.” SIS has sought to ‘redefine, reclaim, and contribute to an understanding of how Islam has been codified and implemented in ways to consider the realities and experiences of Muslim women’s lives.’ Thus, SIS found that it is possible to reconcile and unify Islamic teachings with a stronger and more positive feminist approach.

3.1 Why SIS is Important? (Overall Political Impact)

According to Jannah, SIS began advocating for Muslim women mainly due to "... the dissatisfaction of Muslim women not getting their rights in the Syariah courts. That's why [SIS] became an organization fighting and demanding, and advocating what is right". Hanifah shared in her background story of SIS that before SIS started to advocate for justice in equality for Muslim women, they had simply started off as a study group to learn more about basic principles of Islam with other female Muslims:

And what is different in our [SIS's] approach is that we're working through a religion and going back to the text which is quite radical because nobody had done that before we ... don't believe that many of the injustices that are perpetuated, perpetuated against women ... in the name of Islam actually have Islamic basis, so we're going back to the text and doing a lot of research and all that to, to seek out that actual source of the discriminations which we believe is actually cultural ... and just basic patriarchy. (Hanifah)

Thus, the particular approach that SIS chose to question gender inequalities was to revisit the religious text to seek the actual sources of the discrimination that subjugated Muslim women in Malaysia. Understanding these sources would allow SIS to address the existing barriers within the specific context of Islamic morals. From the standpoint of SIS, it was necessary to address such issues strategically by understanding how to create more effective arguments on controversial issues. By referring to specific verses of the Qur'an, their direct connections to the constitution, as well as lived realities, the position that SIS would take would enable them to advocate for Muslim women more strongly.

Prior to the establishment of SIS as an organization, the founding members of SIS comprised of lawyers, academics, journalists, and activists,

came together to discuss issues associated with the implementation of new Islamic Family Laws which were legislated in 1984, and enforced in 1987 ('The SIS Story', n.d.). Muslim Family Law reform had been the initial mission of SIS, yet inevitably their work expanded to other women's rights issues. However, challenging the status quo of religious norms is never simple or straightforward, as speaking up on such matters and advocating for full women's rights within the Malaysian Islamic context are still considered highly sensitive.

Among many other challenges, SIS has conducted advocacy campaigns against the *Hudud* enactments adopted by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (*Parti Islam Se Malaysia*)-led Kelantan state government in 1993, and the Terengganu state government in 2002 by submitting memoranda to the Federal Government on law reform (Ng, Mohamad & tan, 2006). While the Islamization process has brought about many changes to Malaysian society over the past decades, the unequal situations of Muslim women have been justified particularly under Islamic legislations. Thus, the continuing work of SIS for the rights of Muslim women within the framework of Islam has benefited the feminist movement in Malaysia greatly by bringing attention to these women's rights issues.

However, as one of the women's rights activists, Liu, reflected that "... [SIS's] work is extremely important ... additionally very sensitive. Perhaps 3/4 of the country doesn't agree with them. Probably, because of the ... patriarchy, 'cause one that women are speaking up and, and then two ... they're progressive on Islam". SIS has continually received criticisms from the Malay Muslim communities, because standing up against and questioning the mainstream understandings of Islamic beliefs and practices are highly stigmatized. Thus, discussions of these issues still remain very controversial especially within the strongly religious political context of Malaysia. Under such circumstances, SIS has been drawing more attention to issues regarding Muslim women, and the continuous efforts of SIS over the past

twenty years have played a significant role in challenging the existing status quo on contemporary patriarchal Islamic institutions.

3.2 How has SIS's Activism Impacted Muslim WWLW and Sexual-and-Gender-Marginalized Community?

SIS has played an extremely important role in bringing more awareness to Muslim women's issues. The activism that SIS continues to push forward has brought about a big change for sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities.

While SIS promoted basic human rights for all and continued to advocate for equality and non-discriminatory practices in Malaysia, an ideological clash between the concept of human rights and culturally embedded notions of Islam have created more barriers on the work of SIS. This ideological clash was evident through the lack of support combined with negative attitudes from the public. Such attitudes manifested themselves through a culture of moral policing against women, negative public associations on sexuality-related issues, as well as the lack of religious-based discourses and research on sexuality.

Jannah stated that SIS was against any type of moral policing against women:

... when it comes to ... problems under the Syariah Criminal Offences Act that [SIS] disagrees, ya, the whole ... whole moral policing and this ... punishment for the same-sex ... acts, also falls under what's viewed as ... moral policing, which Sisters in Islam is against. (Jannah)

SIS recognized discriminatory actions against sexual-and-gender-marginalized individuals and communities as basic violations of human rights, which they stated needed to be acknowledged on a larger societal level to enact long term changes. Moreover, SIS believed that all individuals

regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity should be able to receive fair treatment without exceptions. Jannah stated that,

We [SIS] still argue on the basis of religion [that] nobody should be discriminated against ... no matter how you deem the person to be sinner or whatever and this involves also in moral policing because we're very much against moral policing which is happening here in this country. (Jannah)

As Jannah indicated in her interview that while issues related to sexuality were highly stigmatized especially by religious authorities, such issues needed to be addressed within Islamic discourses. She elaborated that it was necessary to widen the scope of how such sensitive issues were received and discussed, instead of dismissed:

We [SIS] appeal for the more gentler and humane understanding within the religion ... to address the issues of LGBTIQ, and not to just brush them off as ... how do you say, sinners, you know. (Jannah)

Because non-mainstream understandings of Islam were considered 'deviant,' SIS was constantly faced with public criticisms of their credibility, putting the organization in a vulnerable position within the Islamic community in Malaysia.

As a result, SIS took strategic actions especially when discussing topics related to sexuality and religion. This was necessary because according to Rayhana, there was still a lack of awareness when addressing diverse perspectives on sexuality even within intellectual discourses in the Muslim community. Rayhana elaborated on the difficulties of gaining support from the Islamic community due to the lack of effective discourses of other (Islamic) perspectives:

...SIS has been attacked from many sides and to embark the issue, then you're totally alone. I mean, the Islamic community, there will be no *Ulama* no *Ustazo*, even support you in any way even the progressive one isn't supporting you ... even the intellectually, in the intellectual discourse in the Muslim world, they have not been much ... discourse on the other perspectives. (Rayhana)

As Rayhana continued in her interview, she claimed that in order to address the controversial issues and defend oneself from potential critics and opponents, it was imperative to have effective research based arguments, as well as solid references from basic religious studies to further support the political position of SIS.

The lack of more intellectualized Islamic discourse on sexuality has meant that there is essentially not a platform to discuss these issues in a more culturally and religiously appropriate manner. Islamic interpretations on sexuality have not yet been constructed on both the regional and global level. Thus, as Jannah indicated that SIS was also still not in the position to utilize intellectualized evidence-based support of Islamic interpretations on sexuality (specific to same-sex sexual relations), mainly because such topics were still considered off-limits by the majority of Islamic discourses. Sheena expressed her concern that without the research support, SIS as an organization would not be able to claim that discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity were violations of basic human rights:

Our [SIS's] only concern is that because we [SIS] are not all well versed in theological arguments when it comes to sexuality, as an organization, we can't go further than saying "do not discriminate". If we had the theological backing, then we would be able to, if we had the theological argument lined out, and there's a case to be made,

then well versed in it, you can defend it. (Sheena)

This is especially important as sexuality issues in particular are more stigmatized and considered controversial compared with gender issues in Malaysia. Clarifying SIS's position on such sensitive issues required a certain amount of knowledge and skills. Without these perspectives, SIS would not only be unable to advocate for their own mission as an organization, but sexual-and-gender-marginalized groups would continue to face more discrimination without support.

However, while the lack of research has been a barrier to further discussions, SIS has also made public statements in support of the local sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities by advocating that discrimination against all human beings regardless of sexuality is wrong.⁵ Because there were no other organization that specifically challenged and advocated for sexuality rights issues from Islamic perspectives in Malaysia, SIS took an important step by issuing public statements to promote anti-discrimination practices through the human rights approach. This has implications for all sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities including Muslim WWLW. The situations that face them are complicated further through not only being a woman in this highly patriarchal society, but also as another minority group within the already minoritized community.

3.3 Protection Issues for SIS Members

Given the social, political, and historical situations that face SIS and different sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities in Malaysia, individuals and organizations that continue to advocate for these marginalized communities need to have an extensive knowledge about how to challenge potential backlash and advocate to bring about change. Due to the controversial nature of the issues that SIS dealt with, it was not surprising that the working environment within SIS tended to be highly

pressured. Azura commented that, "it is a real risk for all the people involved, you know, and that's one of the biggest things, like you have to think about all the risks and all the protection for everyone involved. Like it's ... it's dangerous, and especially for Muslims ..." As SIS was the only Muslim women's rights organization that addressed culturally specific social issues within this religious context, they could essentially become 'easy scapegoats' and be scrutinized publicly, making all its members vulnerable to potential attacks from the government, media and the mainstream Muslim communities. Furthermore, considering the complex situations of sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities within a heteronormative religious society, drawing unwanted attentions due to the less strategic actions that SIS took could potentially result these communities getting targeted for the further discrimination and violence. Thus it was necessary to be strategic about decreasing the potential vulnerabilities on every level.

For SIS members, to feel "safe enough" to go against the grain of society and normalized religious values, they need to feel "protected" on a personal and professional level, in order to advocate in a unified way as an organization. Because as the topics themselves were "... very sensitive and very complicated because it's ... considered new knowledge for ... feminists even to work on within the Islamic or faith tradition. Yea, very, very difficult", as Jannah said. She elaborated that this was especially because issues related to sexuality were still considered highly sensitive topics and remained difficult for some SIS staff to discuss openly even within the human rights framework.

Jamilah also explained the significance of why such a strategy was necessary for staff, to not only defined SIS on a professional level but also on a personal level:

We [SIS] have staff ... who may not be as progressive as the other [SIS]

Members, and even among the Member have different points of views. It's about keeping everybody in same page to be formed what the realities on the ground is. You know, what the challenges on the ground. (Jamilah)

Jamilah and Sheena stated in their interviews that prior to any kind of public statements being issues, SIS conducted knowledge building training and meetings for staff, in order to position themselves on controversial and sensitive topics. For example, when SIS issued a statement against the *Seksualiti Merdeka* ban in 2011, there were also concurrent knowledge and capacity building trainings for their staff. It was due to the sensitive nature of the issue as Jannah explained that the levels of understanding might vary amongst the individual staff members. This point was further highlighted by other staff members of SIS, including Sheena who recognized the issue of “protection” and being “prepared” not only for the communities they advocated for, but also for themselves:

... [when] you get attacked from working at the organization [SIS], and if you are not prepared, then that can be like, feel like ‘oh my god’ you really feel threatened. So [SIS] also has considered to take care of staff as well. (Sheena)

It was important for SIS to address the varied perceptions and knowledge base of all members within SIS. Through such professional development, SIS staff would essentially be able to gain the language in order to fully advocate for Muslim women’s rights. It was necessary to be strategic about decreasing the potential vulnerability of SIS within the larger context but also on an individual level for those involved in SIS. There was also a general consensus for the need for such awareness building trainings for SIS staff to essentially “protect” themselves not only

from Islamist criticisms but especially in personal relationships:

... to be able to talk about the issue to the family, or sometimes they [staff] get criticized by the family about, friends about, neighbors about SIS's position in this issue. So they need to be well informed to feel confident about talking it, and know how, why the SIS, even if they don't agree. But to understand why SIS takes the position that it takes ... they may not necessarily support all the positions that SIS takes. But they should be able to explain ... why we take that position. (Jamilah)

In other words, regardless of how the individuals within SIS feel about these issues on a personal level, it was extremely important for everyone to understand the nature of the core issues that SIS was striving to challenge. Because the topics are controversial not only on a societal level but also potentially on an individual level, it was necessary for everyone in SIS to be able to “speak confidently” about these issues with friends and family as well. By creating a safe learning environment for each individual within SIS, all SIS members would be able to gain the knowledge that would essentially help them to “protect” themselves when advocating for Muslim women's rights.

4 On Going Women's Activism in Malaysia

In order to address the issues of “protection” on an individual level for all SIS members, SIS conducted ongoing staff group trainings. However, this issue of strategically positioning SIS as an organization for protective measures required not only for each individual within SIS to be well-versed in the political challenges, but also called for SIS to render support from outside. Given that sexuality issues were still not consistently included as part of any discussion on a broader national level, it was important for SIS

to find as much support as possible in order to advocate more effectively. By joining forces with other women's organizations in Malaysia, SIS gained more outside support to challenge the status quo and essentially add another layer of "protection" for the organization as a whole. This support network was built through collective efforts that can be known as 'Joint Action Group for Gender Equality' (JAG).

JAG consisted of a small network of 9 coalitions formed by women's rights groups⁶ and activists aiming to gain more recognition to specific problems, issues and needs of women in Malaysia ("Joint Action Group", n.d.). The uniqueness of these collaborative efforts was mainly due to the ways in which different women's organizations and activists came together in order to address issues that directly affected women in Malaysia. Because of the flexibility in deciding what issues to address and how to support one another effectively, members of JAG were well in tune with controversial issues and events. Liu shared these insights as a member of JAG:

Basically there's 9 NGOs in JAG, and collaboratively ... these NGOs decide what to do or what to say together. So ... there's no like, one NGO or there's no like one director of JAG ... It just like 9 groups do the same thing when something happens, we do together ... So that's the thing about JAG. Everyone is in tune with what's going on at JAG. (Liu)

One of the main goals of collaboration for JAG members was to strengthen the political participation and voices of women to achieve gender equality and increase public awareness of such issues in Malaysian society. Because there was still little general support from the public, those who were involved in JAG recognized the strengths in supporting each other through creating public awareness. Both Rayhana and Azura also reiterated the importance of all activists working together to support one

another:

When it comes to activism ... maybe because we're such a small community and it's hard to do anything anyway, that you need everyone you can get support from. And which include everyone, you know. (Azura)

Being in the, you know, in this activism world, I mean you have to support each other, yea. Because if not, you'll be left alone, if you're in trouble. But I think in general, the activism scene in Malaysia, I think most activists and NGOs are supportive to each other. (Rayhana)

Liu elaborated further on how their strategic efforts strengthened JAG's political stance, given the fact how small the community was to begin with and with the obvious lack of public support:

There's only 9 groups, but all ... the work that JAG does is extremely ... active. And if you do a press statement, first statement is in one area with JAG taking place ... each NGO have their own thing, so if something happens and issues a warrants and responds in media ... JAG is quite cohesive ...I like coming out with these statements and sometimes press conferences, if ... needed. (Liu)

Through creating stronger networks of support, JAG members were essentially able to pool together their resources to collectively address controversial issues affecting women. Because each representing organization within JAG had their own specific focus, JAG members were also able to draw from each other's expertise and knowledge to strengthen the political power of JAG. As there was a range of existing women's issues,

group collaboration was a strategic move in order to challenge larger, more complex issues that individuals alone could not do.

For example, of the 9 groups within JAG, SIS was the only organization that dealt specifically with women's issues within the context of Islam. Sheena stated that "... we [SIS] challenge the ... popular understanding and the monopoly that religious authorities have over the interpretations of religion". Furthermore, SIS's involvement in JAG provided deeper cultural and religious insight into women's issues, especially for the Islamic sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities.

Although activism by JAG was still fairly new and at the beginning of creating alternative ways to openly discuss policy changes and issues related to sexuality topics (or any case perceived to be violating fundamental liberties), it was an important platform for existing women's groups. By using JAG as a platform to further delve into Muslim women's issues, SIS was able to advocate much more effectively for the community, while also contributing to more awareness for other JAG members and the public. Thus, it was clear that SIS played an important role in JAG to discuss sexuality issues with regard to Islam.

5 Conclusion

Through this study, I gained a better understanding of the social and political situations of what Muslim WWLW were facing through examining the multilayered obstacles that existed in Malaysia for Muslim women activists and sexuality rights activists. Muslim WWLW were increasingly subjected to the threat of moral policing in Malaysia yet, studies reflecting these experiences and situations are still limited. It is interesting to note that through this study I realized that while women's rights advocates have considered different sexuality rights issues, the voices and experiences of Muslim WWLW were still underrepresented. Moreover, issues regarding sexual diversity and sexuality rights were not topics that were openly and

actively discussed in the women's activist movement, due to their sensitive nature. Some research has also suggested that women's groups in Malaysia have had difficulty focusing on specific sexuality-related topics within the context of women's rights. However, women's rights advocates have gradually addressed issues that different sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities are facing. More recently, the transwomen community, sexuality rights activist groups, and women's rights groups have supported each other to take up the critical issues facing the transwomen (*mak nyah*) community, including criminal charges under the Syariah court, etc.

A big limitation of this study was that there are very few studies on this topic in the Malaysian context. This was especially when women's issues fell outside the framework of heterosexual norms, such as with women's anatomy over sexual preferences, identity and practices. There were still issues to be further explored in the existing advocacies of women's rights groups. That is not to disregard the changes accomplished and the progress made through their organized efforts and actions thus far. However, there are overlapping issues that affect both Muslim women and Muslim WWLW, thus, all dimensions of women's experiences should be explored. In particular, *pengkids*,⁷ who tend to come from working class backgrounds continue to experience violence (i.e. harassment, rape) due to their "masculine" appearance. Women who did not live up to traditional gender images were easily targeted for harassment and violence. Thus, further work in research and in women's advocacy movement should consider all possible realities affecting women's lived realities and situations.

Considering the limitations identified above, further studies will need to look at how issues are framed in the activist groups and what the effects may be. Also, taking a closer look into the individual experiences of Muslim WWLW might reveal different social class backgrounds, as well as other ethnicities. Through gaining such perspectives, further studies should

examine the ways in which Muslim WWLW continue to negotiate living out their religious faith and same-sex partnerships in Malaysia. Such possibilities found within Muslim women's sexuality rights in the Malaysian Islamic context will shed light on sexual-and-gender-marginalized communities, and also enable both women's rights activism and sexuality rights activism to break down the heteronormative and patriarchal systems.

Footnotes

- ¹ The term “lesbian” carries different connotations across diverse cultural settings. It also holds very different self-identification values for each women-loving individual. The purpose of adopting the term ‘Women-Who-Love-Women’ throughout this study was to capture more nuanced connotations of women’s same-sex sexual relationships in the local context of Malaysia.
- ² The estimated population in Malaysia was approximately 28.3 million in 2010. The Malaysian citizenry is made up of three major distinct ethnocultural groups: 67.4% *Bumiputera* (literally, ‘son of the soil’), followed by 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Hindi, and 0.7% other groups. The category of *Bumiputera* is comprised of Malay and non-Malay indigenous groups such as the *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, as well as *Kadazans* and *Ibans* in the states of Sabah and Sarawak. Amongst these Malaysian citizens, Malays are considered the predominant ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia constituting 63.1% (Malaysia, 2010)
- ³ Examples of criminalization of sexual transgressions include: “sexual intercourse out of wedlock” (*zina*), “sexual relations between male persons” (*liwat*), “sexual relations between female persons” (*musahaqah*). Furthermore, cross-dressing provisions (*pondan*) under SCOA are also used against those who transgress heterosexist norms (Syariah Law, n.d.)
- ⁴ Fatwas are “theological and legal reasoning given by a mufti (the top religious official at the state level) to enlighten and educate the public about Islam ... (and) are regarded as advisory opinion” (Anwar, 2001:240). Yet such fatwas are given automatic force of law under the Syariah criminal law once they were gazetted. The reason why such legal ‘opinions’ are able to have such authority was due to the Administration of Islamic Law (Federal Territories) Act 1993, which granted state mufti’s the authoritarian power to amend or repeal any fatwas previously issued (Anwar, 2001)
- ⁵ Press statement issued by Sisters in Islam to opposes ban on *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Sisters in Islam, 2011)
- ⁶ Current membership of JAG: All Women’s Action Society (AWAM), Perak Women for Women (PWW), Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (Empower),

Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor (PSWS), Sabah Women's Action-Resource Group (SAWO), Sisters in Islam (SIS), Women's Aid Organization (WAO), Women's Center for Change (WCC), Tenaganita ('Joint Action Group', n.d.)

- ⁷ "localized synonym for a masculine-looking Malay-Muslim lesbian" (Wong, 2012, p. 436)

References

- A Malaysian Inquisition? (2014 January 6). In *New Mandala*. Retrieved from <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/01/06/a-malaysian-inquisition/> (Accessed January 6, 2014).
- Anwar, Z. (2001). What Islam, Whose Islam?: Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Women's Rights. In R. W. Hefner (Ed.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (pp. 227-252). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
- Biernacki, P. & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2), 141-163
- Fatwa on tomboys. (2008 October 24). In *The Star Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com.my/story.aspx?file=%2f2008%2f10%2f24%2fnation%2f236290&sec=nation> (Accessed September 26, 2013)
- Joint Action Group. (n.d.) In AWAM. Retrieved from <http://www.awam.org.my/advocacy/jag/> (Accessed January 6, 2014)
- Lee, J.C.H. (2011). *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society, and the State*. London & New York: Zed Books.
- Malaysia. 2010. *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010*. Putra Jaya: Department of Statistics, Malaysia.
- Malaysian religious council issues ban on lesbian sex. (2008 October 23). In *The Associated Press*. Retrieved from http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5izKo_RKkF40cfljjbbi3Yai-5Tw (Accessed September 27, 2013)
- Malaysia's fatwa council explains how 'tomboys' become lesbians. (2008 November 27). In *Pink News*. Retrieved from <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2008/11/27/malaysias-fatwa-council-explains-how-tomboys-become-lesbians/> (Accessed September 27, 2013)
- Ng, C., Mohamad, M., & tan, b. h. (2006). *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sisters in Islam (2011 November 3). *Press Statement: Sisters in Islam opposes ban on Seksualiti Merdeka*. Retrieved from <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?item.922.98> (Accessed September 27, 2013)

Syariah Law. (n.d.). In *E-Syariah Official Portal*. Retrieved from <http://www.esyariah.gov.my/> (Accessed July 25, 2013)

The SIS Story (n.d.). In *Sisters in Islam Empowering Voices for Change*. Retrieved from <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?35> (Accessed January 14, 2014)

Wong, Y. (2012). Islam, Sexuality, and the Marginal Positioning of Pengkids and Their Girlfriends in Malaysia. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16 (4), 435-448

マレーシアにおける「女」同士のつながりを考える —ムスリム女性権利運動と女性を愛するムスリム女性— 上田真央

著者は、マレーシアにおいて女性を愛するムスリム女性（WWLW）を取り巻く社会状況と問題を分析するにあたり、WWLWに関する記述が極端に限られている状況に直面した。そのため本稿では、90年代後半にセクシュアリティ・ 이슈の重要性を示唆したムスリム女性権利団体シスターズ・イン・イスラーム（SIS）に注目し、これまでSISの中でWWLWに関わる問題がどう扱われてきたのか、またその限界と今後の可能性を分析した。調査はSISのメンバーを中心に、セクシュアリティ・ ライツ運動に携わる活動家などを含む14人に個別の半構造化インタビューを実施した。調査の結果、80年代以降推進されたイスラーム化政策とそれに伴う宗教法の改正・ 施行がWWLWを含むムスリム女性や、セクシュアル・ マイノリティを取り巻く問題に強く影響していることが示された。さらに、その宗教政治的な影響により、セクシュアリティや性の多様性などの 이슈を扱うことは「害悪」とされ、啓発活動や支援活動に多くの障壁を生みだしていることも示された。障壁の一つとして、セクシュアリティに関する宗教的議論の脆弱性が強調され、潜在的なリスクへの懸念から活動に関わる人たちやコミュニティの安全確保に関して多く語られた。また、障壁を乗り越え活動を行うため団体という枠を超えた「女」同士の連帯が、他の女性団体やセクシュアリティ・ ライツ運動、トランスジェンダー・ コミュニティとの協働という形で発展してきていることが明らかになった。しかし、WWLWを取り巻く問題が女性権利運動とセクシュアリティ・ ライツ運動の双方から周縁化されていることも示された。そのため、草の根活動でどのように問題の取り組みがされているのか等の調査と、WWLWの経験や社会生活についての実証研究を推進していくことが今後の課題になるだろう。

Keywords:

マレーシア、女同士のつながり、女性を愛するムスリム女性、イスラミック・ フェミニスト・ アプローチ、イスラーム化政策

