

## **MALAYSIAN MUSLIMAH ACTIVISTS' MODES OF THOUGHT: REREADING ISLAMIC AND ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article focuses on the modes of thought of female Muslim (Muslimah) activists in Malaysia towards Islamic and alternative sources of knowledge and how these modes of thought inform their understanding of gender justice for the Muslimah. The Islamic sources of knowledge can be divided into the Quran and the Hadith (recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Western feminism, on the other hand, can be deemed an alternative source of knowledge as it approaches gender issues from a non-religious point of view and typically does not refer to religious texts when discussing gender justice. When the activists refer to the Quran and Hadith as their main sources of women's issues, they acknowledge the importance of contextualising them to modern society. Next, they show an appreciation of alternative sources of knowledge such as Western feminism when talking about women's issues in Islam. While being critical, they are generally not antagonistic towards Western feminism. Nevertheless, there are activists who cannot reconcile between Islamic and Western feminist discourses on women's issues. Data for this article was gathered from in-depth interviews with seven Muslimah activists from six NGOs. Utilising Manheim's sociology of knowledge framework, this article elaborates on how the modes of thought of the activists generally resemble one that is neo-modernist.*

**Keywords:** *Muslimah*, Malaysia, modes of thought, Islamic sources of knowledge, feminism

## ISLAMISATION AS A CATALYST FOR *MUSLIMAH* ACTIVISM

Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, and where Western feminist ideals are seen by some Muslim conservatives to include “ostensibly pernicious concepts such as human rights and democracy” (Lee 2018, 15), Malaysia presents an important case study in exploring how *Muslimah*<sup>1</sup> understand gender justice and the achievement of gender justice as a goal during the period of Islamisation. Islamisation in Malaysia may be likened to a phenomenon known as “Islamic resurgence”, which gradually emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Nagata 1984, 81; Muzaffar 1986, 60). Civil society groups, Muslim societies in campuses and various political parties were important actors in this resurgence, which was initially a proselytisation (*da'wah*) movement “aimed at Islamising society from the bottom by promoting Islam as a comprehensive way of life – to make Muslims become better Muslims” (Norani, Zainah and Zaitun 2005, 80). Conservative religious elites argued for a return to the Islamic way of life as they imagined during the early years of Islam (Stark 2003, 176).

Integral to the early Islamisation was an emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers to strengthen the integrity of the patriarchal family. The expectations placed on men and women were qualitatively different, as Norani, Zainah and Zaitun (2005, 86) noted: “the control of women, their social roles, movements and sexuality form the core of the Islamic fundamentalist’s view of gender roles and relations in the “pristine Islamic society and state” which they seek to establish”. During the 2000s, a period referred to as “hegemonic Islamisation” (Maznah 2014, 183), Syariah family law became pronouncedly biased towards men. For example, a married man could marry another woman with minimal legal penalties despite not having the financial means to do so. Men could also pronounce divorces out of court, but they need to pay a fine or serve a short jail term. They did not have to settle any marital claims brought by their wife. On the contrary, there were more challenges for women to obtain a divorce, even by judicial means, since they had to go through the burdensome process of “ineffective counselling and reconciliation exercises, besides maintaining that they have been obedient wives” (Nik Noriani 2003, 36). The effects of Islamisation continue to manifest itself today, as noted by Bob Olivier (2016: 271) that “in Malay society generally, there is less tolerance than there was formerly for any behaviour deemed ‘*un-Islamic*’”. Religious police at the federal, state and local council levels try to ensure adherence to various regulations, such as attending Friday prayers, not drinking alcohol in the open, and not being in close proximity with a member of the opposite gender who is not *mahram* (a member of one’s family with whom marriage is prohibited). The last few years has witnessed such enforcements; for example, in 2017, an enforcement team from Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (JAWI) raided a

married couple in their hotel room and arrested them for being in close proximity, or *khalwat*, even after showing proof of their marriage. The couple sued JAWI for “wrongful arrest... violation of privacy, tort of abuse of office and violation of the duo’s rights to personal liberty and freedom of movement” (*TodayOnline* 2017). The couple did later retract their suit. In another example of religious policing, JAWI detained a Muslim woman and three men for consuming alcohol during a raid at an entertainment outlet said to be patronised by middle-aged Muslims for entertainment and alcohol consumption (*MalayMail* 2015). One’s sexuality, or attitudes towards the LGBT community, may also be policed. In 2016, JAWI arrested prominent lawyer Siti Kasim during a raid on a transgender event that she was speaking at (*MalayMail* 2020). She was subsequently charged with obstructing the raid and acquitted.

*Muslimah* non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women’s wings of NGOs emerged and continue to be vocal during these developments, responding both to state discourses on Islam and everyday understandings of Islam in Malaysian society. One principal response of the NGOs was to go back to Islamic and alternative sources of knowledge. These two sources of knowledge can be divided into: (1) the Quran; (2) the Hadith; (3) “Western” feminist beliefs such as women’s right to sexual self-determination (Lewis and Mills 2003, 4) and full equality. While activists also refer to bodies of knowledge such as scholarship on Islamic feminism, this article only focuses on the aforementioned three sources of knowledge. This article will focus on modes of thought as they are expressed in one’s outlook on the relationship between religion and gender justice. The modes of thought of the activists are important to study as they determine how the activists discuss women’s issues and the influence these discussions could have on the Malaysian public. This article argues that the activists’ modes of thinking regarding these sources of knowledge generally resemble one that is neo-modernist due to their overall emphasis on the contextualisation of the Quran and Hadith, its ethical message, the individual rights of women and their nuanced approach towards Western feminism.

## **NEO-MODERNISM AS A MODE OF THOUGHT**

This article utilises some insights from the Sociology of Knowledge framework (SoK) by Karl Mannheim to study the modes of thought of *Muslimah* activists towards various sources of knowledge. The main thesis of the SoK approach is that “there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured” (Mannheim 1936, 2). A mode of thought can be defined by how an individual or group thinks of a particular social issue and what

kind of attitude is adopted towards dealing with this issue. Mannheim explains one such mode of thought, that which is ideological. A mode of thought is ideological “when it fails to take account of the new realities applying to a situation, and when it attempts to conceal them by thinking of them in categories which are inappropriate” (Mannheim 1936, 86). Ideas are inherently partial because they emerge from a specific social milieu. Ideologies emerge from all sectors of the social world, including “status groups, sects, occupational groups, schools, etc.” (Mannheim 1936, 48). Modes of thought are also expressed in one’s religious discourse.

Islamic neo-modernism, also known as contemporary modernism, is a progressive intellectual movement that is attributed to Muslim intellectual Rahman (1980, 246). While neo-modernism is typically used in the Indonesian context, the paper argues that the term also applies to the modes of thought of the interlocutors in Malaysia. Neo-modernism may not have a conceptual appeal beyond the Malay world to describe Muslim engagement with modernity. Western observers, for example, may only be familiar with “modernist” or “modernism”. Yet, a distinction ought to be made between classical and contemporary forms of modernism. It is true that both orientations suggest that the spirit of modernity can be found within Islam, and that it is “necessary to reform conservative outlooks by adopting and making use of modern ideas” (Basya 2016, 48). However, classical Islamic modernism is a response to colonialism. Its proponents were principally concerned with modernising Islamic education and studying (Western) modern sciences (Esposito 2010, 125). Islamic neo-modernists, characteristic of the post-colonial period, are concerned with similar issues but they also discuss other topics, such as religious pluralism, human rights and social harmony. The emphases of classical and contemporary Islamic modernism differ. The activists’ emphases on individual rights, the ethical dimension of Islam, and their generally nuanced appreciation of Western feminism allows the current author to characterise their modes of thought as neo-modernist rather than just modernist. It is during the 20th century that Muslim intellectuals, such as Rahman, explained Islam’s lack of cultural progress (as compared to the West) as a consequence of the absence of a “critical-rationalist interpretation of the religion” (Bektovic 2016, 160). The hallmark of neo-modernist thought is the interpretation of the classical tradition of Islamic legal scholarship in a way that is sensitive to changing historical and cultural contexts. Such an interpretation is compatible with the belief that the essence of the Quran is found not in its laws or doctrines but its ethics (Rahman 1982, 154). With respect to the Quranic revelation, Rahman noted that the Prophet Muhammad’s personality, experiences and reflections played a significant role in the formation of the content of the Quran (Akbar 2020, 131). Rahman also viewed the Quran as a text which had an ethical foundation. He felt that the Quran should not be approached as a

legal document made up of specific rules and literal injunctions (Rahman 2002, 37). Ethics was superior to any legal concept in the Quran. Rahman named this approach the “double movement theory”. The first of these two movements involved understanding a particular legal ruling in the Quran based on the socio-historical background of the Quran. Once one has stood understood this background, one could engage in the second part of the double movement which is “working out specific Islamic norms to be applied now” (Panjwani 2012, 43).

Rahman’s influence on Muslim thinkers, such as those from Indonesia, also allow us to study the manifestations of neo-modernist thought there. Neo-modernists in Indonesia grew “concerned more with Muslim values and ethics than with law” (Woodward 2001, 35). Islamic law to them was an open-ended tradition that needed to be interpreted in line with changing historical and cultural contexts. Islamic neo-modernists in Indonesia also argue for the “synthesis of traditional Islamic scholarship with the modernist concern for *ijtihad*,<sup>2</sup> and with modern Western learning in the social sciences and humanities” (Barton 1997, 345).

Neo-modernist thought cannot be appreciated fully without understanding the neo-modernist’s attitude towards the West. Islamic neo-modernists echo the Islamic modernists of the early 1900s in that they seek to find in Islam “that which is “good” and “noble” in Western civilisation” (Barton 1997, 344). Yet, neo-modernists, many of whom grew up in a post-colonial age, express more confidence in Western culture and learning, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. Neo-modernists do not see the West as an “occidental other”. They are largely accommodating of Western sciences or sources of knowledge when engaging in discussions on topics concerning the Muslim community, such as gender relations and political governance.

This article explores modes of thought as expressed in the relationship between religious and gender activist discourse. While neo-modernism has not been understood as a mode of thought in scholarship on Islam and gender activism, the current paper shows that it can be understood as such when exploring how the activists reason when seeking to reconcile current societal conditions with Islamic values of justice and compassion rather than focus on a legalistic and literal interpretation of the Quran and Hadith. With regards to Western feminism, the author found that the activists were generally appreciative of how it granted women in Western societies economic rights, political representation and legislative reforms on matters such as divorce (Briatte 2020). Some activists even saw similarities in how Islam and Western feminism fought for women. However, a few activists saw the West as the “other”. They did not have an accommodative attitude towards Western sources of knowledge, such as Western

feminism. They understood Western feminism as culturally inauthentic and contradictory to Islamic practices in Malaysia.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study site was the state of Selangor where most NGO head offices are based. The state is significant historically as it is where about 20 women met to discuss women's issues ranging from domestic violence to the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Ng, Maznah and Beng Hui 2006, 43). The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews. Activists from *Muslimah* NGOs were the main sample for the study.<sup>3</sup> *Muslimah* NGOs as used in the study refer to an NGO whose main aim is to speak to the interests and concerns of Muslim women in Malaysia. Nevertheless, these NGOs also have broader aims of fighting for gender justice, which takes into consideration the everyday and structural experiences of both women and men. Additionally, the *Muslimah* NGO here is defined by its purpose, rather than its sex composition. For example, Sisters in Islam (SIS), while predominantly consisting of women, does have a few men in their organisation. Members of the *Muslimah* NGOs were contacted via social media platforms. The respondents were recruited using the snowball method with the help of a member of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM). He passed on the author's contact to the vice-president of the women section of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (HELWA ABIM), one of the respondents in this article. She then informed the author of other Muslim women's groups or Muslim NGOs with women's wings. Preliminary research was done to look at official statements or the online web pages of the various women's groups in Malaysia to examine their vision and aims.

The author could not conduct interviews in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of international borders. Instead, interviews were conducted online with members of the various women's groups. The author interviewed one to two members who held various positions in each group. The duration of each interview, which were recorded with their consent, ranged from one to two hours. The NGO activists have all been anonymised with pseudonyms. All the respondents had at least a bachelor's degree and studied in universities in Malaysia, the UK, the US and Australia. Their study subjects varied, ranging from genetics to civil law. Seven activists from six NGOs were interviewed, namely, SIS, Interactive Muslimah Association (IMAN), the women's wing of ABIM, The International Women's Alliance for Family Institution and Quality Education (WAFIQ), the women's wing of Malaysian Muslim Solidarity (Wanita ISMA), and the women's wing of IKRAM (Wanita IKRAM).<sup>4</sup>

## **THE ORGANISATIONAL AFFILIATIONS OF THE ACTIVISTS**

It is important to note that women's activism should never be construed as homogenous or universally directed towards the dismantling of patriarchal structures. On the contrary, the NGOs do disagree on what justice for women looks like. These conflicts arise from their respective understanding of Islamic thought. Moreover, these NGOs are usually affiliated to larger organisations which in turn influences the positions of the NGOs and the activists.

For example, former Wanita ISMA President Norsaleha binti Mohd Salleh stated Wanita ISMA's stance on feminism:

Wanita ISMA adalah sayap Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) sebuah NGO Islam sederhana (Norsaleha dan Abdullah Zaik 2011). Sepanjang tahun 2014, Wanita ISMA melaksanakan program pendidikan dan kemasyarakatan yang bertujuan memberi kesedaran dan kepekaan untuk mempertahankan jati diri wanita muslimah. Sekaligus mendedahkan wanita muslimah terhadap agenda asing seperti feminisme dan liberalisme yang boleh mengganggu proses pembangunan jati diri itu sendiri (Norsaleha 2015: 8).<sup>5</sup>

The NGOs' positions on various women's issues must be seen in relation to their positions, affiliations and antagonisms vis-à-vis one another. By extension, individual activists within these NGOs contend with this diversity of negotiated meaning-makings that is informed by how they view the positions of their affiliated NGOs. NGOs, such as Wanita ISMA, Wanita IKRAM, and HELWA ABIM are female wings of their parent and male-dominated NGOs ISMA, IKRAM and ABIM. Together with IMAN, they are also affiliated to Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN), which was specifically formed to oppose the formation of the Inter-faith Commission (IFC) in Malaysia. WAFIQ emerged more or less as a contender to SIS. Except for SIS, all the NGOs in this study are vocal in their opposition to "plural" and "feminist" thinking in society.

The brief social mapping of the NGOs above gives us an idea of how activists think about various women's issues. Their modes of thinking may either confirm or challenge the organisational stance of their NGOs.

## **CONTEXTUALISING THE MESSAGE OF THE QURAN TO SOCIETY TODAY**

Muslims consider the Quran to be the most authoritative text in Islam as they believe that it is a revelation from God to Prophet Muhammad. Although the Quran was revealed in a particular time and society, it is often used as a guide for Muslims living in modern society.

My interlocutors noted that one had to start from the Quran and the prophetic tradition when discussing women's issues in Islam. The question was how these Islamic sources were understood. Amirah of Wanita IKRAM lamented that the lack of women's voices in Islamic discourse reflected a wider problem of individual practices deviating from the message of the Quran:

To be honest, I think the way Muslims practice Islam in Malaysia does not fully adhere to the *Quran* and how Allah wants Islam to be practiced. I think as a whole, Allah sent the *Quran* and it can be used until the day of judgment but there are some differences that you can change and tolerate according to the culture and time period. The environment that we're in could have great differences from the time when Islam ruled the world. Muslims in Malaysia have been Muslim for years and there are some traditional mindset that goes behind it and they think that this is the right Islam when actually it's a traditional culture rather than the true beliefs of Islam itself.

When expressing her concern that traditional cultural practices among some Muslims were viewed as representative of the true beliefs of Islam, Amirah challenged the historical understanding of Muslim society when reading the Quran. While she argued that the Quran was timeless in the sense that its spirit and essence remained unchanged till the day of judgement, she noted that one had to take into account today's realities in order to retain this spirit and essence. This meant applying reason when reading the Quran. While a traditionalist uses reason based on a "non-distinction between law as a product of a particular historical epoch and the eternal values or moral principles underlying it" (Noor Aisha 2004, 417), Amirah's neo-modernist mode of thought advocated for the use of reason that distinguished between the contents of the holy scriptures and the context in which it was written. Additionally, a reading of the Quran had to be informed by ideals of justice and compassion.

Maisarah of SIS similarly attached an importance to these ideals and a neo-modernist reasoning when adopting a historical approach towards the message of the Quran and Hadith. She recalled the intellectual developments leading to



the founding of SIS. During SIS's early years, they were frequently approached by many Muslimahs who sought advice on how to deal with shariah issues in Malaysia. These women particularly felt that shariah laws in Malaysia did not seem to reflect the religion of Islam which they understood as just. Maisarah recounted how these questions necessitated SIS members to study how certain verses of the Quran were being used by some Muslims to justify unequal gender relations:

So, I think in that process, they (SIS members) came up with the ability to counter certain perceptions that were considered normal or dominant at that point in time, you know, certain ways of thinking that have become so embedded in our society. But if you go back to the Quran, it might not be the case. In terms of God's message, that might not be the case, right? So, along the way it was interpreted by some people and it reflected their society, but it didn't necessarily reflect the true message of the Quran.

Like Amirah, Maisarah differentiated between society during the early years of Islam and society today. Practices in the past might not be applicable today. For example, women may not have been extensively engaged in public life before but that is not the case today. In Maisarah's neo-modernist mode of thought, the themes of justice and historicity were prominent in terms of how she argued for the need to challenge dominant practices that may have been common during the early years of Islam but were no longer compatible with the realities of *Muslimah* today. She argued that the Quran had to be interpreted in a way that was sensitive to today's society rather than society 1400 years ago. This is how one could retain the ethical spirit of the Quran.

## **CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PROPHETIC TRADITION**

Just as one could selectively refer to verses of the Quran to suit his/her patriarchal biases, the same could be said when referring to a Hadith which confirms that same bias. Muslim scholars today have noted that Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad have been interpreted by Islamic theological experts in ways that look down on women (Duderija 2011; Lamrabet 2018). The justification given for this androcentric interpretation is the Islamic creation story where Adam was the first human to be created as an emblem "for all men for all times" while Eve was merely "imitative and derivative" of Adam (Duderija 2020, 337). Since Eve is viewed merely as a "by-product" of Adam, scholars with patriarchal biases argue that men are innately superior to women since the former were created first.

Saliha from WAFIQ expounded on how Muslims should interpret the Hadith in a way that is sensitive to modern society's conditions. She also divided Hadith into

*sahih*<sup>6</sup> and *daif*<sup>7</sup> in order to explain that not all Hadith could be trusted in the first place:

In terms of Hadith, we need to be very careful in terms of *Hadith sahih*, *Hadith daif* and all the divisions of the Hadith. We need to refer to the correct one. But in terms of Hadith, we need to understand it not only literally. Some of the Hadith need to be understood contextually; for example, on the Hadith on women to be a leader. That Hadith says that if a woman becomes a leader, the nation will not prosper. But today we need women as leaders as well.

Saliha's distinction between authentic Hadith and those that were weak demonstrated her neo-modernist mode of thinking when interpreting the prophetic tradition. She was discerning in her reliance on narrations of the Prophet's life as a guide for Muslim society today. She did not accept a Hadith as valid without considering whether there was a rigorous chain of transmission involved. Saliha noted that it was important to think critically about the validity of a Hadith; for example, one could not take a Hadith about Muslimah leadership being detrimental to Islamic society out of context and conclude that *Muslimah* today should not be leaders.

Amirah, Maisarah and Saliha expressed a neo-modernist mode of thinking in seeking to harmonise the ideals of the Quran and the Hadith with contemporary society. They articulated a concept of gender justice that was relevant to society today. There was also a greater concern with the ethical message of the Quran rather than a fixation on rituals and legal doctrines. Typical of the neo-modernist mode of thinking, Amirah, Maisarah and Saliha noted that the formulation of Islamic laws was an outcome of human interpretation affected by socio-cultural conditions (Rahman 1982, 20). Hence, if prohibiting women from assuming leadership positions was acceptable during the early years of Islam, such a rule could no longer be justified in today's society.

## **WESTERN FEMINISM AND ISLAM: A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP**

The following sections explain the modes of thinking of the activists towards Western feminism. First, the neo-modernist mode of thinking towards Western feminism is explained. The neo-modernist expresses a significant degree of optimism when integrating Western sources of knowledge with Islamic tradition. However, such an attitude of positivity does not negate a critical appraisal of Western sources of knowledge. While the activists felt that Islam and Western feminism both advocated for women's rights, they also critically evaluated the

origins and different strands of Western feminism. All in all, these activists were generally accommodative of Western feminism. Nevertheless, there were a few activists who viewed Western feminism as culturally inappropriate for a Muslim society such as Malaysia. There was a lack of nuance in their appraisal of Western feminism. While most of the NGOs in this study do not espouse Western feminist principles, the fact that activists from these NGOs sought to integrate Western sources of knowledge with Islamic principles is testament to a reality that the activists' views may not always reflect the positions of the NGOs.

Many of the study's interlocutors pursued their studies in countries, such as UK, US and Australia. Interacting with other students helped them understand how feminism was being discussed there. Mastura of IMAN felt that there was a similarity in the values being espoused by Islam and Western feminism. She was grateful to Western feminism for "pinpointing the matters":

I always tell my friends, you know, sometimes you have to be thankful for Western feminism because they really pinpoint the matters. But I also have to caution everybody to say that Western feminism is not original. Why do you think feminism only came to the West in the 17th or 18th century? Because the Ottoman Empire was at its height in the 16th century, the influence through Andalusia and so on, where they (the West) saw women had it good (in the Empire). So that's why I always defend Western feminism. Women's education... women's right to marriage... women's right to land... to own property... these are Muslim values.

Mastura referenced historical circumstances to argue that the issues feminists in the West fought for were a legacy of the rights accorded to Muslim women living under the Ottoman Empire. In saying that Western feminism is not original, she was not criticising its contributions to women in Western societies. She felt that Western feminism articulated Islamic concerns, since the issues western feminists fought for, such as women's education, were important rights for Muslim women as well. She was able to appreciate the value of Western feminism while noting the Islamic influence on it. This appreciation of Western intellectual tradition is an important component of the neo-modernist mode of thought; Mastura was able to accept ideas of Western feminism as part of her worldview while contesting its originality.

The author also asked Mastura what she thought of labels such as feminist. Western feminism is currently a contentious subject among various segments of Malaysian society. The accusation against feminism as "liberal" is reflective of a growing polarisation in Malaysia between activists who "position themselves as

defenders of secularism and liberal rights on the one hand, and those who position themselves as defenders of Islam and Islamic law on the other” (Moustafa 2013, 771). As a Muslimah, Mastura was not comfortable about conflating the labels “Muslim” and feminist and being referred to as an Islamic feminist. This was not because she harboured suspicions about feminism’s cause. She proceeded to tell me her response when she was described by an American academic as an Islamic feminist:

I don’t agree with that. Because for me, if you say that I am an Islamic feminist, it means I cannot be a feminist if I’m a Muslim. Or I cannot be a Muslim if I am a feminist. So therefore, I have to be an Islamic feminist to justify it. I don’t need that labelling. If I believe in the Quran, that’s enough. I know my right as a woman. I don’t have to bring in Western feminist ideas to justify what I already believe in.

There is a crucial difference between being critical of a label and rejecting that same label just because it is associated with a social movement. Mastura was appreciative of the contributions of Western feminism from an Islamic point of view. However, she did not feel it was necessary or even useful to label herself as an Islamic feminist because that label presumed that Islam and feminism were different in moral and intellectual value for her. Such a label clashed with her belief that the values espoused by Western feminism were also Islamic.

Like Mastura, Hanisah of HELWA ABIM saw similarities in how Islam and Western feminism advocated for women. Although she was appreciative of both Islamic and alternative discourses of justice for women, she acknowledged that there was a need to be aware of the audience she was addressing:

I think my approach or ABIM’s approach would be according to our audience. If the audience are all Malay, Muslim-based, then our approach should be the Quran and *sunnah*.<sup>8</sup> But if the audience is mixed, then we are going to talk about federal law and human rights. I think we share the same values, non-Muslims and Muslims. But in my advocacy, it’s interesting to explain the Quran and *sunnah* to a non-Muslim audience. Our problem is that we don’t talk about it.

Although she felt that non-Muslims and Muslims shared the same values, she accepted that some Muslims may be uncomfortable with Western feminist discourses on women. She was sensitive to the comfort level of both Muslims and non-Muslims. She expressed her neo-modernist mode of thinking towards Islamic and alternative sources of knowledge by attaching importance to plurality in thought. It was important to her that Malaysians of varying intellectual and religious backgrounds could be accommodated.

Hanisah was also cognisant of the politics behind the label “feminist”. She recounted that she had “a tough time with all this labelling” as she was simultaneously chastised by one group and commended by another. She emphasised on her right to identify with whatever label she saw fit; she remarked that “we should all be feminists” because, for her, feminism echoed Islam’s advocacy for women’s rights and human rights. She found it confusing that the word feminist was viewed with a great degree of suspicion in Malaysia:

But when it comes to commitment and activism, it is right for me to put myself as a woman activist because of my work, especially with the children and women. But in some cases, I would rather call myself as an activist. Because I also fight for men’s rights in court. I say sometimes that we should all be feminists. Because they also fight for women’s rights and human rights. But for a Muslim woman wearing the veil, someone who comes from ABIM, when you say feminist, it means you’ve been influenced by the West. It’s quite dangerous to say you’re a feminist in Malaysia. *Susah* (difficult) la Imad, *keliru* (confusing).

Hanisah could not see any contradiction between Islam and Western feminism. The suspicions against Western feminism by some Muslims in Malaysia went against her Islamic neo-modernist mode of thinking of viewing Islam and Western feminism in harmonious terms.

There were, however, a few activists who saw Islam and Western feminism in antagonistic terms. They worried that Muslim society would be “corrupted” by external ideas, such as Western feminism. Their views are not surprising in a country where some view feminism in conspiratorial terms (Lee 2018, 15).

## **WESTERN FEMINISM AS DETRIMENTAL TO MUSLIM SOCIETY?**

Feminism in Malaysia is accused by some of being inauthentic and an “insidious package of Western influence that includes ostensibly pernicious concepts such as human rights...” (Lee 2018, 15). The Islamic resurgence movement in the 1970s and 1980s accentuated a divide between Muslims who sought to extend the scope of Syariah law over Muslims and Muslim feminists who called for reforms in Islamic institutions, including Islamic family law in Malaysia (Maznah 1998, 24). The former group of Muslims, including anti-feminist Muslims, could challenge feminist movements in Malaysia, such as SIS, without being perceived as “outright anti-feminist” since they based their anti-feminist arguments on Islam rather than an opposition to women’s rights (Schäfer and Holst 2014, 59).

There were activists whose mode of thinking showed disagreements with Western feminism which showed little nuance. They worried that Western feminist thought could be detrimental to Malaysian society because of its "incompatibility" with Islam. There was no attempt to distinguish between different strands or expressions of feminism. Western feminism was simply not suitable for a Muslim society, as Salbiah and Saliha's colleague from WAFIQ, argued:

The problem with feminism is that they are trying to say that we need equality by these arbitrary numbers of 50/50 when in Islam, that is not so. Globally, I don't really have issues with global feminists because I think for some reason, they respect our culture more than our own feminists. Because frankly speaking, I don't know why but this apologetic attitude, I call it a defeatist attitude of some of our own feminists who look up to other values...they are emulating the West so much. As long as the definition is by equality, that is not compatible with us. I would not say that we should have Muslim feminist.

While she opined that there was no need for Western feminism in Malaysia, she expressed greater concern at the "apologetic attitude" of Malaysian feminists (such as SIS) who tried to emulate the West, as if Malaysian feminists had forgotten their own culture. Instead of viewing Islam and Western feminism in harmonious terms, the latter was viewed as an "other" that had no relevance and was a danger to Malaysia.

Diyannah of Wanita ISMA also expressed her concerns about the effects of Western feminism on Malaysians. Her stance reflected Wanita ISMA's stance on Western feminism. Feminism to Diyanah was just another "ism" (including liberalism) not in line with a pure and unadulterated Islam:

Islam is Islam. It does not need to be combined with any other belief. But of course over time, you know with the Renaissance...all these isms very much started after the Renaissance. And then how they actually tried to push all these ideas into the Muslim world, all over the world. You have all this confused people coming into town and then trying to import their ideas into us. That'll make our life more difficult. We have enough problems on our own as a Muslim community but all these ideas do not help. I always say that I can find all the needs and all the rights and all my dignity as a Muslim woman in Islam, okay? Why should it be defined with feminism?

Diyannah viewed feminism as an external ideology anathema to the social fabric of Malaysia; it would only confuse Malaysians more. Islam could adequately address the rights of *Muslimah* in Malaysia. An important observation is that while

activists such as Mastura from IMAN appreciated the contributions of Western feminism while being critical of the feminist label for her own activism, Diyanah rejected that label in its totality. Her mode of thinking viewed feminism in wholly contradictory terms with Islam.

There were activists whose neo-modernist mode of thought appreciated the contributions of Western feminism towards addressing Muslim women's issues while also being critical in their appraisal of the former. However, activists such as Salbiah and Diyanah, who themselves occupy high positions in the employment sector or aspire towards high positions, took to task the necessity of Western feminism for Muslim society. While they expressed no issue with women engaging in paid work, one of the core demands of the second wave feminist movement, Western feminism was seen by them as culturally inappropriate for Muslims. They averred that Islam already had its own blueprint of gender relations not based on Western feminist definitions of equality.

## **CONCLUSION**

The activists generally expressed a neo-modernist mode of thinking regarding various sources of knowledge where they were able to appreciate similarities between Islamic and non-Islamic traditions while being critical of both. This balanced approach demonstrated the importance that the activists attached to being able to think critically about the Quran, the Hadith, and non-Islamic sources of knowledge. The activists acknowledged the contributions of both sources of knowledge to their worldview on women and Islam. This article has sought to add to a nascent literature that adopts a Mannheimian framework when studying religious discourse in Muslim societies. Gender activist discourses amongst scholars and activists in the Muslim world and Malaysia particularly have been explored without a focus on the religious orientations underlying these discourses. Hence, the author utilised the SoK as an analytical framework to study *Muslimah* gender activist discourse. Admittedly, this article is not fully representative of the modes of thought of *Muslimah* activists in Malaysia towards various sources of knowledge. As the most developed state in Malaysia, the discourses of Muslimah activists in Selangor necessarily reflect their socio-economic conditions and class background. Muslimah activists in Selangor, compared to the more rural states of Malaysia such as Kelantan, would have enjoyed greater access to both Islamic and secular education, enabling them to speak and comment more on Islamic and alternative sources of knowledge. Future studies could explore, if any, rural-urban differences in how *Muslimah* activists in Malaysia speak about these sources of knowledge in relation to gender justice.

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## NOTES

1. “*Muslimah*” is the Arabic word used to refer to a female adherent of Islam. While *Muslimah* has only recently been used in Malaysia to refer to a female Muslim, the author uses *Muslimah* as it is a term used by some of the NGOs on their websites.
2. *Ijtihad* is the process through which a jurist attempts to derive or rationalise laws on the basis of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet through legal reasoning and hermeneutics.
3. For a description of the NGOs, please refer to Appendix A.
4. IKRAM is an Arabic word which means “honour” or “respect”.
5. The translation of the text as follows: Wanita ISMA is a branch of ISMA, a moderate Muslim NGO. Since 2014, Wanita ISMA has conducted educational and community programmes in order to provide awareness about defending the identity of Muslim women. At the same time, these programmes also expose these women to foreign agendas, such as feminism and liberalism, which can disrupt the process of developing one’s identity.
6. *Sahih* refers to the categorisation of a Hadith believed to be authentic if it has been conveyed by a trustworthy and competent person due to a strong chain of transmission.
7. *Daif* refers to the categorisation of Hadith as “weak” due to discontinuities in the chain of transmission.
8. *Sunnah* may be translated as “the way”, in this case the way or the traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad.



## APPENDIX A

### Sample of Female Muslim NGOs in Selangor, Malaysia

Organisation	Description
Sisters in Islam	Muslim NGO Sisters in Islam (SIS) can be said to be the most prominent group of activists in Malaysia. Among its founding members are Zainah Anwar, Amina Wadud and Norani Othman. Originally formed in 1987, they were registered as an NGO in 1992. SIS' advocacy is grounded in the principles of gender equality, justice, and dignity in Islam. Currently, SIS runs a legal clinic known as Telenisa, offering free legal advice to both women and men on legal matters pertaining to Islamic family law. Among the NGOs in this study, SIS is the only NGO that identifies itself as Islamic feminist. They see a strong compatibility between the tenets of Islam and feminist principles. However, their advocacy efforts have not come without backlash from both Islamist groups and the government. In 2014, the Selangor Islamic Religious Council issued a <i>fatwa</i> (Islamic legal ruling) labelling SIS as deviant for promoting "alien" values. SIS has been challenging this <i>fatwa</i> till today.
Helwa ABIM	Helwa ABIM refers to the women's wing of ABIM and was founded in 1974. Its vice-president is Fatin Nur Majdina Nordin. "Helwa" is a Malay acronym which translates as "Women's Affairs" (Hal Ehwal Wanita). One of its initial goals was to establish a pre-school education system with Islam as the core in the curriculum. This system consisted of Islamic childcare centres, known by its Malay acronym TASKI (Taman Asuhan Kanak-Kanak Islam). They frequently collaborate with NGOs, such as SIS, on issues in gender reform, including efforts to introduce a sexual harassment bill in Malaysia. As part of its service to the <i>Muslimah</i> community, Helwa also runs a shelter home for women with unwanted pregnancies called Rumah Perlindungan Bayt al Rahmah (Bayt al Rahmah Shelter Home).
Interactive Muslimah Association (IMAN)	Formed in 2007 with Dr Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman as its founding president, IMAN seeks to engage with the effects of globalisation on Muslims and the state of Islamic practices in Malaysia, particularly with respect to interpretations on the role of Muslim women. IMAN's members come from various backgrounds, including scholars, professionals, and housewives. The acronym IMAN means 'faith' in Arabic. The word " <i>Muslimah</i> " indicates that IMAN's membership is solely based on women, and it advocates for the equal status of men and women in terms of their religious piety and knowledge in religious affairs. Unlike SIS, IMAN does not call itself 'feminist', but instead projects itself as an intellectual Islamic reform movement aimed at strengthening the identity of the Muslim community.

The International Women's Alliance for Family Institution and Quality Education (WAFIQ)

WAFIQ is currently led by its president, Dr Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar, who also teaches in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science at University Sains Islam Malaysia. Dr Rafidah was also formerly the information chief for Wanita ISMA. As the name suggests, one of WAFIQ's primary concerns is on the family as an institution so that society as a whole can function. It also provides a platform for *Muslimahs* to voice concerns pertaining to their rights as a wife, mother, member of the family and employee. Some of WAFIQ's members write for the Malaysian press on topics ranging from marital rape to women in Islamic history. They are also vocal on topics not specifically related to women's issues, such as the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Wanita ISMA and Wanita IKRAM

The author grouped Wanita ISMA and Wanita IKRAM together as some members from IKRAM and ISMA used to be in an NGO called Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM). IKRAM is an Arabic word which means honour or respect, while ISMA is the Malay acronym for Malaysian Muslim Solidarity. Wanita IKRAM, the women's wing of IKRAM, was launched in October 2010. Its current president is Ustazah Sallawahiu binti Salleh. It focuses on the development of women, families, and children. Like Helwa ABIM, Wanita IKRAM also runs a half-way house called Raudhatus Sakinah for at-risk female teenagers.

Wanita ISMA represents the women's wing of ISMA. Its current president is Dr Suriani Sudi. One of their goals is to highlight leadership capacities among *Muslimahs* so that they can comment on issues affecting Muslim women in the community. The slogan of Wanita ISMA branch in Subang Jaya (a city in Selangor) is "perjuangan bermula dari rumah" (the struggle begins at home) (Wanita ISMA, 2020). The NGO is particularly concerned about the influence of Western feminism. In a corporate video, their former president Dr Norsaleha binti Mohd Salleh asserted that Western feminism was disruptive to the lifestyle and practices of Muslim women in Malaysia. She added that Wanita ISMA was averse to any discussion on gender equality that did not abide by the shariah.

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