

A RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION  
ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA



*Power*

*Expression*

*Violence*

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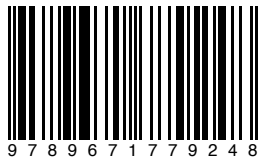
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*This research, in many ways, is KRYSS Network's expression of solidarity for the plethora of women, queers and allies who defend the online space and are constantly pushing back against patriarchy, often at the risk of facing violence and multiple aggressions. It is this sense of solidarity and collective strength that motivates and helps frame this research in the first place.*

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

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In 2015, a Facebook post went viral, with a description on how the author planned to break into the house of 69-year-old Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin and sexually assault her after she called for a review of the Sharia laws, including on those related to *khalwat*. She is the spokesperson for G25, a group of former high-ranking

a purist, misogynist and supremacist Islam, and replace the country's constitutional framework with an Islamic version.<sup>2</sup> In such an environment, gender is no less a political weapon, and "outspoken women" who share their opinions, views and thoughts on the politics of division in this country or on Malay supremacy and how these

*Online gender-based violence is a systemic tool used in denying the lived realities, identities and opinions of women and LGBTQ persons who challenge the dominant status quo.*

civil servants that encourages rational and progressive discourse on Islam. When told off on Facebook by someone else that it was not funny to joke about sexual assault, the author of the said post scoffed and retorted that it was his right to freedom of expression.

Malaysia, in reality, is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, and for all intents and purposes, a secular country. Despite having a significant non-Muslim minority of about 35 to 40 per cent, the political dominance of the Malay-Muslims has allowed for the proliferation of an ethno-religious ideology that Malaysia is a Muslim country.<sup>1</sup> The political climate is one where the politics of fear is used to divide the peoples and to reinforce a hierarchy of citizenry. Research has shown that this politics of fear predominantly seeks to establish

negatively impact on human rights issues of minorities and vulnerable communities, are seen as very real threats. In general, discourse perceived as "feminist" or "liberal" is considered a threat to Malaysia's political Islam. It is therefore unsurprising for both women and men, but particularly women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) persons, to face violence, hate speech, and other forms of targeted attacks, often personal and vile, for expressing their views and desires for women's human rights, gender equality and non-discrimination. The brazenness of the attacks is often framed within an ethno-religious framework and more often than not, are further underpinned by sexism and misogyny. It is in this context, that online gender-based violence is effectively weaponised against women, and LGBTQ persons' freedom of opinion and expression

<sup>1</sup> A Malaysian Malay, constitutionally, is defined as someone who is Malay and Muslim. There is no separation between the race and the religion.

<sup>2</sup> Basarudin, A. (2015). *Humanizing the Sacred: Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Gender Justice in Malaysia*. University of Washington Press

(shortened to “freedom of expression”), and by an extension of that, their public and political participation.

Online gender-based violence is a systemic tool used in denying the lived realities, identities and opinions of women and LGBTQ persons who challenge the dominant status quo. Online discourse deemed “sensitive”, “confrontational”, or “controversial”, such as on the demands for at least 30 per cent of policymakers to be women; the banning of child marriage; sexual harassment; the decriminalisation of same sex relations, and gender non-conforming identities and expression, often invite hostile attacks and online gender-based violence, especially when those who speak up on these issues are women and more so if they are feminists or LGBTQ persons.

Aggressors of online gender-based violence can include human rights allies, and when called out, will argue for an absolutisation of freedom of expression on social media platforms and call for a blanket rejection of any form of censorship. Such an approach assumes that men, women and LGBTQ persons are on a level playing field where everyone enjoys equal access to and exercise of freedom of expression. It is trite that gender inequality is one of the most complex social systems. It is complex not only because it is structural and systemic. Our gender identity simultaneously interacts with multiple identities including race, religion, age and sexuality which inevitably produces other inequalities and lived realities of stigma, discrimination and violence. While gender inequality is often and rightly addressed in terms of gender-based violence and its discriminatory impacts, the impact of gender inequality on freedom of expression is largely unaddressed. A framework for an unrestrained exercise of freedom of expression means very little to women and LGBTQ persons if it ignores the inherent unequal power dynamics in our access to human rights and equal protection under the law. Freedom of expression is fundamental for the claiming of all human rights, but those who ignore this unequal access to freedom of expression and those who try to silence others through intimidation, harassment, and violence, are equally guilty of not understanding, and possibly not wanting to understand, the inherent

limitations of our current interpretation and practice of freedom of expression.

While much of the root causes of online gender-based violence are similar to the other forms of gender-based violence, the social media has enabled the ease and speed in perpetrating violence, allowing for amplification and aggregation of the harms on a much wider scale, with higher possibilities of repeat traumatisation for the victims. Yet, it is a form of violence that is often trivialised, normalised, and ignored. Dissemination of violence through social media is neither singular nor linear. Recognition of the expressions of violence has been a major challenge, especially in cases of coordinated violence online. The violence can range from explicit threats and incitement to kill or rape, with or without an identified target by the aggressor(s), or to seemingly *intellectual and kind* language that is designed to harass without any intention of really wanting to understand (i.e. sealioning).<sup>3</sup>

Social media can no longer shield itself behind the claim of being a neutral and emancipatory design that offers a level playing field to everyone in exercising their right to freedom of expression. The unequal power dynamics faced online by women and the LGBTQ people also then shape the priority of internet intermediaries and law enforcers. For victims/survivors of online gender-based violence, the often-made suggestion by social media platforms of blocking or muting the aggressors so that they no longer have interactions does not make the online space any safer, and in fact further reinforces the unequal access to freedom of expression. Advise to block the aggressor merely ensures that a growing group of attackers are around the virtual corner and in all likelihood are being riled up further. They can continue to perpetrate the violence without the full awareness of the victim. The victim’s lack of awareness of the violence does not mean that there is no victim. The non-consensual distribution of intimate images (NCII), for example, often takes place without

<sup>3</sup> Sealioning is a troll tactic, coined by David Malki in his webcomic Wondermark, and describes someone who pretends to be clueless about an issue in order to harass or waste one’s time.

the victim's knowledge as to whom their images have been distributed and to what extent. It is this distinction that renders online gender-based violence equally dangerous, if not more so.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Considering the complexities and challenges of addressing online gender-based violence, this research seeks to examine the inherent inequalities in women's<sup>4</sup> access to freedom of expression, and the ways in which their exercise of freedom of expression invites online gender-based violence. This research forms part of KRYSS Network's ongoing efforts to develop evidence and knowledge that could contribute to the elimination of online gender-based violence. KRYSS Network is a not for profit organisation that has observed and researched how there is unequal access to freedom of expression in Malaysia, particularly for women and marginalised communities. Our work, among others, focuses on ensuring safer online spaces for all peoples to freely express their lived realities, experiences, opinions and thoughts without threats of harassment and violence.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "women" is used to include cisgender women, transgender women and female-presenting persons who identify as non-binary.



# 2

## LITERATURE REVIEW

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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This part of the research looks at existing literature on how power and inequalities operate and are reorganized in the digital information era. It highlights how social media remakes our body as a social actor and our interaction online is inescapably through our gendered, sexed and raced bodies. The array of power relations and discrimination experienced by women online are closely intertwined with their material bodies. As a result, it affects their access to freedom of expression while vitriol behaviours and contents are accepted under the veil of freedom of expression. The last section of the literature review is a comprehensive review and analysis of current redress for online gender-based violence and the current challenges in holding stakeholders accountable.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE “TECHNOLOGICAL MODE OF THE SOCIAL”

We can no longer view social media as a mere tool or platform of a consumer’s choice or lifestyle; it is the “technological mode of the social”, mediated through automated procedures, algorithms and filters.<sup>5</sup>

Social media is not mere media in the traditional sense. It does not just transmit information, cultural expression or news content. Our identities and social relations are embedded in the data network that constitutes this technological mode of the social. Such understanding of social media is also explained by Vaidhyathan where he observes that the big internet companies

like Facebook, Google, Amazon, share one long-term vision: to be the operating systems of human lives, measuring our activities and states of being and constantly guiding our decisions through the back work of algorithms and big data.<sup>6</sup> Social media companies compete to dominate the data streams that would monitor, monetize and govern our automobiles, homes, appliances and bodies. With everything reporting back to central and algorithmically governed computers, our decisions and opinions are increasingly guided and manipulated by these companies.

In Herrera’s study of 20 Instagram users, she observes that there exists a “technological imperative” to name one’s sexual self as lesbian and queer (through words and use of hashtags). The design of Instagram incentivizes users to name a part of themselves i.e. interests, trends and identities, to engage with other equally stigmatized identities and to seek validation. The compulsion to claim one’s sexual identity online, is not only due to the availability of technological features, it is also a response to social conditions that “privilege and normalize heterosexuality and stigmatize all other sexualities”.<sup>7</sup> Customizable privacy options and architectural features on social media mediate individuals’ decisions about how they disclose their sexual identities online—to name an aspect of the self which they otherwise could not have done so. We misunderstand the impact of social media when

<sup>5</sup> Lovink, G. (2019). *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism*. Pluto Publisher. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Vaidhyathan, S. (2018). *Anti-social media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Herrera, A. P. (2018). Theorizing the Lesbian Hashtag: Identity, Community, and the Technological Imperative to Name the Sexual Self. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. 22(3), 313-328

we assume they operate or exist outside of human bodies, identities and social relations. We are being mediated as much as any item of cultural expression or information.<sup>8</sup> Social media remakes the body as a social actor, classifying some as normative and legal, and some as illegal and out of bounds.<sup>9</sup>

In a digitally networked world, contexts are constantly intersecting and overlapping – compromising the separation of work from leisure, and of friends from family. Our context bleeds into one another too easily.<sup>10</sup> Social media platforms assume that openness to expression, information and connection are crucial to building trust and a better world.<sup>11</sup> However not all openness serve as antidotes to corruption and violations of rights. They can, in effect, deepen entrenched inequalities in society.<sup>12</sup>

This technological mode of the social, to use Julie Cohen's idea, runs counter to the way we live individual lives.<sup>13</sup> Our sense of selfhood is multivalent, dynamic and we constantly form and reform our identities as we move in and out of different contexts, directing different performances<sup>14</sup> at different audiences.<sup>15</sup> Such fluidity of identities is essential especially to those who do not conform to the normative structure in society as it allows individuals to manage their various identities and control the manner of disclosure.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Social media is often discussed with Web 2.0<sup>16</sup> – the explosion of crowd-sourced, user-generated content is the engine that powers social media. This is made possible by “free”, more specifically, zero-fees, web platforms and relatively inexpensive software and devices. Closely intertwined with the concept of user-generated content is the promise of freedom of expression, the decentralisation of media ownership and the potential to make visible the diversity of voices.

Especially in countries with repressive regimes and conservative societies, social media offers an alternate space where women are able to express themselves and their sexuality with less risk of being stigmatized and incarcerated.<sup>17</sup> It opens up space for interventions and to call out sexism, stigma and discrimination. Some scholars view that social media has opened up a niche space for the negotiation of alternative identities and queer sexualities through everyday practices and performances of the self in digital spaces.<sup>18</sup> It has emerged as a platform for young queers to practice intimate storytelling with like-minded audiences and in return it facilitates the individual and collective construction of identity, pride and belonging.<sup>19</sup> A study on TikTok users in Sri Lanka has illustrated the internet as a space where “social norms are negotiated, performed and imposed” through their clothes, facial expressions and dance moves often in extension of “other spaces shaped by patriarchy and heteronormativity”.<sup>20</sup>

It is also a space for mobilisation and public organising to stand up against the status quo. One notable example

8 Vaidhyanathan, S. (2018). Op. cit.

9 Nakamura, L. (2018). Afterword: Blaming, Shaming and the Feminization of Social Media. <https://lnakamura.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/nakamura-afterword-feminist-surveillance-studies.pdf>

10 Vaidhyanathan, S. (2018). Op. cit.

11 Mark Zuckerberg wrote in a 2010 op-ed in the Washington Post, “If people share more, the world will become more open and connected. And a world that’s more open and connected is a better world.” Accessible at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/23/AR2010052303828.html?tid=a\\_inl\\_manual](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/23/AR2010052303828.html?tid=a_inl_manual)

12 Cohen, J. E. (2012). *Configuring the Networked Self: Law, Code, and the Play of Everyday Practice*. Yale University Press.

13 Ibid.

14 According to performance theorists, identity in a social world exists only insofar as it is performed to and for others. Opinions, commitments, habits, and dispositions solidify over time through the trial and error of performance, just as styles of dress do.

15 Cohen, J.E. (2012). Op. cit.

16 The term was popularised in 2005 by Tim O’Reilly and used to describe a shift in the nature of web content from relatively static monologic home pages for individuals or groups to dynamic, interactive spaces shaped by participatory content creations and consumptions by users.

17 Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau. (2012). Women, Privacy and Anonymity: More than Data Protection. In A. Randhawa, S. (Ed), *Critically Absence: Women’s Rights in Internet Governance*. APC.

18 Disemelo, K. (2019). *Performing the Queer Archive: Strategies of Self-Styling on Instagram*. Wits University Press.

19 Cavalcante, A. (2019). Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 66 (12), 1715–1735.

20 Perera, S. & Wijetunga, Minoli. (2019, 10 May). How TikTok is a platform for performance and play for women in Sri Lanka. GenderIT. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/how-tiktok-platform-performance-and-play-women-sri-lanka>

is the #metoo<sup>21</sup> movement which was made viral by a group of women in the entertainment industry of the United States, but eventually globalised and localised in many other countries and communities.

Techno-optimistic stories about the social media empowering women's freedom of expression should be treated with caution and to not discount the years of on-the-ground mobilisation and advocacy by feminists and the women's rights movement that had laid the foundations for such forms of expression. While there has been some positive recognition of feminist and gender equality expressions, these expressions are also unwanted, punished and viewed as censorship or policing social media.<sup>22</sup> For example, one woman was harassed on multiple social media platforms as a result of her calling out sexism in an article that conflated the purchase of a pair of cufflinks (merchandise of a non-profit run by human rights lawyers) with fellatio as a great gift to one's boyfriend or husband for Christmas. The article was posted on a popular blog believed to be run by a group of mostly male lawyers. Among others, the attacks denied the article as sexist and claimed she was unable to take a joke.<sup>23</sup>

In her book on the digital visual, Lisa Nakamura cautions against the internet's ability to enfranchise minorities in a realm of self-expression and self-production. She observes that being permitted to exist is not the same as equal representation, and digital visual capital is a commodity that is not freely given to all but must be negotiated and actively seized by those to whom it would otherwise not be given.<sup>24</sup> For example, Muslim

women have claimed bodily autonomy by appearing on social media without the *tudung*—a controversial act, especially if they do wear the tudung when in public, or if they have been wearing the tudung and then decided to take it off. These women are often sexualized by men, sensationalised by tabloid websites, subjected to vile attacks, doxxed, threatened with physical violence, and reported to the Islamic religious authorities, as experienced by Malaysian singer, Zizi Kirana (2020), activist Maryam Lee (2019) and Emma Maembong, a British-Malaysian actress (2019).

Nonetheless, the production of expression on social media comes with a certain inherent contradiction. Our expressions and engagements—from chats, tweets, sharing, to reading an opinion piece, creating an amateur newsletter and livestreaming a protest, are commodified on social media. They are a form of immaterial labour<sup>25</sup> that is a fundamental source of economic value to social media.<sup>26</sup> As we engage and express our thoughts, ideas, selves and identities on these platforms, we are also the labourers. With this new form of labour, it also allows for new forms of gendering and racialization. In an article titled "Unwanted Labour", Lisa Nakamura states that the acts of communicating on social media about sexism, gender discrimination and other acts of social justice activism fall outside the realm of "point of production" and they share a similarity to unpaid reproductive labour that produces social use values.<sup>27</sup>

Locating the production of our expression within a capitalistic model is important as it informs and determines the platforms' approach to ensuring freedom of expression but at the same time inevitably

21 In 2006, activist Tarana Burke founded the Me Too movement and began using the phrase "Me Too" to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and assault in society. The phrase "Me Too" developed into a broader movement following the 2017 use of #MeToo as a hashtag following the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations.

22 Nakamura, L. (2015). The Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Colour Call Out Culture As Venture Community Management. *New Formations*, 86, 106-112. <https://lnakamur.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/unwanted-labor-of-social-media-nakamura1.pdf>

23 Documented in Juana, J. (2017). *Voice, Visibility and A Variety of Viciousness*. Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER). <https://apc.org/en/pubs/voice-visibility-and-variety-viciousness-malaysian-study-womens-lived-realities-social-media>

24 Nakamura, L. (2008). *Digitizing Race: Visual Culture of the Internet*. University of Minnesota Press.

25 Immaterial labour, as defined by Hardt and Negri, is labour that creates immaterial products i.e. knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response. They can be conceived in two separate forms. The first form involves either linguistic or intellectual activity, typically producing ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figure, images etc. The other form is called affective labour. It is the labour that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2004). *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. The Penguin Press. Hardt and Negri (2005, 208-209),

26 Jarett, K. (2016). *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife*. Routledge.

27 Nakamura, L. (2015). Op. cit.

leads to their failure in recognizing online gender-based violence as a violation to and denial of women's freedom of expression. It is ironic that platforms purport to promote freedom of expression are actively engaged in content moderation models that are deeply adverse to freedom of expression.<sup>28</sup> Harassment and violence that are gender-based are also framed as "user-generated content" under the terms of service of most social media platforms and such a characterisation reduces the debate to a simplistic view of gender-based violence as a form of free speech.<sup>29</sup>

Freedom of expression is intrinsically linked to one's ability to facilitate individual autonomy, and not merely an unlimited license for any expression. As Rebecca Solnit puts it, a free person tells her own stories.<sup>30</sup> Aggressors of online gender-based violence generate content and adopt various tactics to attack their targets, making it impossible for others to equally engage in a conversation. When a person's self-expression is designed for the purpose of extinguishing another person's speech, it should receive no protection.<sup>31</sup> Contents generated in incidents of online gender-based violence do not contribute to political, cultural or social discourse. Instead, they are disruptive to civic engagement and political and cultural participation.<sup>32</sup> In that sense, allowing the expressive autonomy of aggressors to go unchecked would run in contradiction to the very fundamental principles of freedom of expression.

## ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

There are multiple terms used to describe online gender-based violence, namely cyberviolence, cybersexism, technology-related violence, e-VAW, e-bile and

many more. For the purpose of this research, we shall employ the term "online gender-based violence" and the following definition by Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

"Acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email."<sup>33</sup>

Numerous reports and research have been done on online gender-based violence. Yet, grasping online gender-based violence remains notably difficult. In an article by Elena Pavan, she highlights four challenges in addressing online gender-based violence, namely:

"First, its *intangible* and *sociotechnical* nature. Online gender-based violence is intangible in nature and is at the crossroads between social and technological factors. On the one hand, it ties back to long-term discrimination, disempowerment, and abuse of girls, women, and other sexual and gender minorities; while, on the other, it finds in the online space new means for spreading, consolidating, taking new and unexpected forms.

Second, it is a *diverse* phenomenon, as it can take many different forms (e.g., slurs, harassment, threats, doxxing, etc.) and these forms can vary in different contexts. For example, taking advantages of the different features made available by different platforms, but also varying depending on different sociocultural contexts.

Third, it is a *dynamic* phenomenon, as it changes rapidly together with the digital communication technologies that enable it.

Finally, it is a *complex* phenomenon, as different forms of online gender-based violence involve, over time, different actors—victims, perpetrators, but also actors who should oversee to secure

28 Jeong, S. (2015). *The Internet of Garbage*. Vox Media. [cdn.vox-cdn.com/uploads/chorus\\_asset/file/12599893/The\\_Internet\\_of\\_Garbage.0.pdf](http://cdn.vox-cdn.com/uploads/chorus_asset/file/12599893/The_Internet_of_Garbage.0.pdf)

29 Ibid.

30 Solnit, R. (2017). *The Mother of All Questions*. Haymarket Books.

31 Steven, J. H. (2008). *Free Speech and Human Dignity*. Yale University Press.

32 Poland, B. (2016). Don't Feed the Trolls: Why Advice about Cybersexism Fails. In *Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Online Violence*. University of Nebraska Press.

33 Association for Progressive Communication. (2018). Online gender-based violence: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission\\_UNSR\\_VAW\\_gender-based violence.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_gender-based%20violence.pdf)



women's online safety or at least restore justice once violations occur."<sup>34</sup>

Black feminists, feminists of colour, and lesbian feminists have long criticised the reduction of all women's experiences with violence into a singular dimension which is often of white, cisgender, heterosexual and middle-class subjects.<sup>35</sup> Two studies on online gender-based violence in Malaysia also show that the violence against women differs along the lines of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion and class. While gender is a commonality in all the cases of online gender-based violence, the phenomena cannot be fully understood without examining its intersectionality with their diverse identities and power relations.<sup>36</sup> In that sense, to speak of these experiences as monolithic and universal is to deny the interconnections between race, class, gender and sexuality—it is to assume that only people of colour have a racial identity, and women only have a gendered identity.<sup>37</sup> As Kevin Kumashiro notes, "[I]n our commitment to change oppression and embrace differences, we often fail to account for the intersection of racism and heterosexism, and of racial and sexual identities. Ironically, our efforts to challenge one form of oppression often unintentionally contribute to other forms of oppression, and our efforts to embrace one form of difference exclude and silence others".<sup>38</sup> At this juncture, there are very few studies on the intersectionality of women's online gender-based violence experiences based not only on their structural location in gender but also in class, race, sexuality, gender identities, disabilities and so on, and their

situated relationships with technology.

Varying types of online gender-based violence have been documented and studied. Instances of online gender-based violence include but are not limited to online sexual harassment, non-consensual distribution of photographs/videos, unsolicited nude images, hate and extremist speech, rape and death threats, blackmailing, trolling, doxxing, online mobbing at a targeted individual or group of people.<sup>39</sup> They affect not only the targeted women but also create a chilling and silencing effect on others who have seen how women are abused on social media.<sup>40</sup>

These threats, insults and violence are part of a silencing strategy to keep any narratives and voices that challenge the status quo and heteronormativity outside of the public sphere.<sup>41</sup> This pattern of silencing is observed in a research conducted by Juana Jaafar, where eight out of fifteen women (lesbian, cisgender and transgender women) who have experienced online gender-based violence felt forced to leave social media platforms, inevitably affecting their ability to exercise their right to freedom of expression.<sup>42</sup> In another study by Angela M. Kuga Thas and Serene Lim on online extremism in Malaysia, it was observed that the behaviour exemplified and the narratives used assumed that men are inherently supreme and hence are entitled to dominate others by virtue of their gender identity.<sup>43</sup> Inherently, these acts of online gender-based violence, whether organised, paid, unorganised or unpaid, are designed to silence all discourse demanding for social change and gender equality.

While online gender-based violence has its roots in the entrenched problem of patriarchal norms and heterosexism, social media has enabled the facilitation

34 Parvan, E. (2018). More than words: Investigating online discourse as a space for online gender-based violence. *GenderIT*. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/more-words-investigating-online-discourse-space-gender-based-violence>

35 Midori, H. & Turzynski, A. (1997). Beyond Our Invisibility—Diverse Feminisms and the Quest of Japanese Women for Self-Defined Identity. *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, 9, 66–78.

36 Jaafar, J. (2017). Op. cit.; Lim, S. & Kuga Thas, A. M. (2018). *Preventing Violent Extremism Online: Understanding the phenomena through gender lens*. EMPOWER.

37 Fox, C. O. & Ore, T. E. (2010). (Un) Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT 'Safe Spaces'. *Feminist Studies*, 36(3), 629–649.

38 Kiumashiro, K. (2001). Queer Students of Color and Antiracist, Antiheterosexist Education: Paradoxes of Identity and Activism. In A. Kiumashiro, K. (Ed.), *Troubling Intersections of Race and Sexuality: Queer Students of Color and Anti-Oppressive Education*. USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. page 1.

39 Segrave, M. & Vitis, L. (2017). *Gender, Technology and Violence*. Routledge.

40 Jaafar, J. (2017). Op. cit.

41 Poland, B. (2016). The Many Faces of Cybersexism: Why Misogyny Flourished Online. In *Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Online Violence*. University of Nebraska Press.

42 Jaafar, J. (2017). Op. cit.

43 Lim, S. & Kuga Thas, A. M. (2018). Op. cit.

and acceleration of gender-based violence. For instance, hypervisibility of our everyday lives through the use of social media makes it easy for community and family members to conduct surveillance, especially to target women and vulnerable groups; the networked affordances of social media and the sharing culture created by social media has better enabled those who engage in hate speech and misogyny to garner followers and mobilise mob attacks; the resultant disinhibition and the inability to view/experience the impact of our comments; and the broader cultural values of the internet rooted in patriarchy and social inequality that reinforces unequal access to freedom of expression and discriminatory practices.<sup>44</sup>

Research has shown that online gender-based violence has the potential to cause emotional, social, financial, professional and political harm. Among other consequences, it affects women's ability to find jobs, network, socialize and engage in public and political discourse. Women have resorted to self-censorship and it inevitably affects their ability to partake freely in the sorts of self-expression and self-representation regarded as key benefits of the social media.<sup>45</sup>

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Like any other form of gender-based violence, the State has an obligation to promote, protect and fulfil human rights. The due diligence principle obligates the State to prevent online violence, protect victims of online gender-based violence, investigate and prosecute instances of online violence, punish aggressors and provide redress and reparation for victims of online gender-based violence.<sup>46</sup> In 2017, the CEDAW (Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) General Recommendation No. 35 makes

reference to "contemporary forms of violence occurring on the internet and digital spaces" when talking about the fact that gender-based violence against women occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private".<sup>47</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women released a report in 2018 on online violence against women and girls, highlighting the internet as a "broader environment of widespread and systemic structural discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls," which is a grave hindrance for human rights.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the Malaysian government has ratified CEDAW, the international agreement has yet to be incorporated into domestic laws. While Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution explicitly spells out prohibition of discrimination on grounds of gender,<sup>49</sup> it is limited in its interpretation and coverage. The court has taken a vertical interpretation to the provision and held that discrimination based on gender is prohibited only from violations of their rights by the government and public authorities, not by private entities.<sup>50</sup> There is no gender equality legislation in place providing for the comprehensive realisation of substantive equality for women in both public and private spheres of life.<sup>51</sup>

In Malaysia, civil society has argued that online gender-based violence can be addressed substantively using either laws penalizing gender-based violence or specific laws penalising information and communication

44 Segrave, M. & Vitis, L. (2017). Op. cit.

45 Jane, E. A. (2017). Feminist flight and fight responses to gendered cyberhate. In A. Segrave, M. & Vitis, L. (Ed.), *Gender, Technology and Violence*, New York: Routledge. Page 48

46 Abdul Aziz, Z., & Moussa, J. (2016). *Due Diligence Framework: State Accountability Framework for Eliminating Violence against Women*. Malaysia: International Human Rights Initiative. [duediligenceproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Due-Diligence-Framework-Report-151116.pdf](http://duediligenceproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Due-Diligence-Framework-Report-151116.pdf)

47 CEDAW General Recommendations 35 (2017). [tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/35&Lang=en](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/35&Lang=en)

48 Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective. A/HRC/38/47. (2018). [digitalibrary.un.org/record/1641160?ln=en](http://digitalibrary.un.org/record/1641160?ln=en)

49 except as expressly authorized by this Constitution, there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment. [agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/Federal%20Consti%20\(BI%20text\).pdf](http://agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/Federal%20Consti%20(BI%20text).pdf)

50 Beatrice a/p Fernandez v Sistem Penerbangan Malaysia and Anor [2005] 3 MLJ 681. [globaljusticecenter.net/files/BEATRICE.pdf](http://globaljusticecenter.net/files/BEATRICE.pdf)

51 Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) & Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG). (2018). The Status of Women's Human Rights: 24 Years of CEDAW in Malaysia. [wao.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The-Status-of-Womens-Human-Rights-24-Years-of-CEDAW-in-Malaysia.pdf](http://wao.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The-Status-of-Womens-Human-Rights-24-Years-of-CEDAW-in-Malaysia.pdf)

technologies (ICT) offences.<sup>52</sup> As with other form of gender-based violence, the availability of relevant legislations does not always translate in adequate access to justice for women due to a variety of reasons, such as, trivialisation of women's experiences, victim-blaming, gender-based discrimination, lack of training and awareness on gender-sensitivity, prevailing patriarchal and sexist norms that skew the interpretation and enforcement of existing laws, etc. The lack of evidence of direct physical harm from online gender-based violence further subject women to trivialisation of their experiences, marginalisation of their voices, and victim-blaming when they report the abuse. Other factors that make it difficult for women to access justice are the fact that Malaysian laws that target the digital sphere are oriented towards commercial and technical offences, and that the State is only concerned about online violence and hate speech directed at religion, race and royalty.<sup>53</sup>

Women are reluctant and rarely report the violence online to law enforcers or government agencies, for a variety of reasons. One of the most common reasons is that women have very little faith and trust in the government in addressing the online violence they face.<sup>54</sup> In a research done in India, few women knew the relevant laws when it comes to online gender-based violence and they held the common perception that the law is not useful, largely due to the ineffective implementation of laws on procedural grounds.<sup>55</sup> As the lead organisation on online gender-based violence, Association for Progressive Communications (APC) notes that responses by State on online gender-based violence have been grossly inadequate even with the

existence of laws that can be applied.<sup>56</sup> Law enforcement typically trivialises online gender-based violence and victim-blaming is common among police personnel. This attitude results in a culture of silence, where victims are inhibited from speaking out for fear of being blamed for the violence they have experienced.<sup>57</sup>

The issue paper Due Diligence and Accountability for Online Violence Against Women has highlighted the inefficiency of the current legal system to meet the challenges presented by online gender-based violence. This includes challenges in investigation and adjudication of cases, lack of mechanism, procedures and technical expertise.<sup>58</sup> This is consistent with the experience of Malaysians where victims have been asked to run around to different agencies and departments when they file a complaint—often between the police department, the cybersecurity agency and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission—without receiving any satisfactory assistance.<sup>59</sup>

The law works best when the offences are definable and the aggressors are identifiable. Legal thinking is organised around bottom line dichotomies—victims versus aggressors, offences versus rights, online versus offline.<sup>60</sup> There is little research that has attempted to develop a legal framework for online gender-based violence. Legally, there is a fine line between actionable (i.e. direct death threats) and non-actionable violence (i.e. trolling) and abuse that cannot be regulated.<sup>61</sup> Aggressors for non-actionable violence may feel a certain legal and moral impunity, shrouded by a false

52 Malaysia's Joint Civil Society Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women: Online Violence Against Women. (2017). [empowermalaysia.org/isi/uploads/2017/09/Joint-Civil-Society-Submission-to-the-UNSR-VAW-online-VAW\\_final-2017.pdf](http://empowermalaysia.org/isi/uploads/2017/09/Joint-Civil-Society-Submission-to-the-UNSR-VAW-online-VAW_final-2017.pdf)

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Anja K., Richa KP., & Shobha SV. (2013). *'Don't Let it Stand!'* An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India. New Delhi: Internet Democracy Project. [internetdemocracy.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf](http://internetdemocracy.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf)

56 Association for Progressive Communication. (2017). Online gender-based violence: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. [apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission\\_UNSR\\_VAW\\_GBV\\_0\\_0.pdf](http://apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf)

57 Ibid

58 Abdul Aziz, Z. (2017). Due Diligence and Accountability for Online Violence Against Women. Due Diligence Project & APC. [apc.org/sites/default/files/DueDiligenceAndAccountabilityForOnlineVAW.pdf](http://apc.org/sites/default/files/DueDiligenceAndAccountabilityForOnlineVAW.pdf)

59 Malaysia's Joint Civil Society Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women: Online Violence Against Women. (2017). Op. cit.

60 Scales A. (1992). Feminist Legal Method: Not So Scary. *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, 2(0), 19-23. [escholarship.org/content/qt7bv1j1pb/qt7bv1j1pb.pdf](http://escholarship.org/content/qt7bv1j1pb/qt7bv1j1pb.pdf)

61 Abdul Aziz, Z. (2017). Op. cit.

principle for freedom of expression and as a result of being distanced from the victims. The distinction between actionable and non-actionable violence tend to obscure more than enhance the discourse. While the actions are exaggerated and more threatening in actionable violence, the foundational misogyny beliefs about women and their role in society are the same.<sup>62</sup>

The diffused and spreadable nature of online gender-based violence has rendered identifying aggressors difficult. An incident of online violence can lack identifiable leadership. It often takes the form of a collective phenomenon and involves countless aggressors. Everyone can be an aggressor of online gender-based violence. A like, a screenshot, a retweet, a sharing, a comment can, in fact, amplify the violence and harm for the victim. While it is traumatising to be at the receiving end of all the hate and trolling, it is empowering for the aggressors. Each share and like embolden the aggressors' confidence and offer a sense of social approbation and validation for their behaviour.<sup>63</sup>

A distinction was made between primary perpetrator/aggressor and secondary perpetrator/aggressor in the Due Diligence issue paper. The former is the person initiating the violence, namely the author, or the person who first uploads the offending data or images; the latter is the person who purposefully, recklessly or negligently downloads, forwards, or shares the offending data or images.<sup>64</sup> The secondary aggressors belong to a less defined category. They could be sharing the content as a one-off post without necessarily knowing it is part of a hate mob or could be consciously and deliberately sharing the content, such as a young boy "enjoying" a rape joke out of peer pressure. In this sense, laws targeting aggressors can be an illusory approach

to counter online gender-based violence given that almost everyone can be an aggressor.

The above is also echoed by Sarah Jeong in which she suggests the legal system should address the most extreme kind of violence (primary aggressors) and that technical architecture of online platforms should be designed to dampen harassing behaviour (secondary aggressors).<sup>65</sup> The sheer volume of aggressors and the environment that allows for online gender-based violence demand consideration not only as collective individual incidents but as a significant social problem.

Redress for online gender-based violence by the State and the internet intermediaries, even when available, only takes affect after the harm to the victim has been done. Interventions work to interrupt or halt a behavior but rarely to correct false accusations or degrading insults.<sup>66</sup>

Given that online gender-based violence takes place on private platforms, the role and responsibility of social media platforms in eliminating online gender-based violence has undergone a serious paradigm shift. Social media platforms can no longer claim that their lack of direct involvement with the incidents of online gender-based violence would recuse them from any liability. Various research has shown that the content moderation policy, terms of service, design and feature of the platforms, including its algorithm and the broader cultural values of the platforms have direct impact on online gender-based violence.

A research on trolling behavior found that such behavior can be induced from two predominant factors, namely mood and discussion context.<sup>67</sup> On mood, the said

62 Poland, B. (2016). *Misogynist Movement: Men's Rights Activist and Gamergate*. In *Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Online Violence*. University of Nebraska Press.

63 Gabriella, B. (2017). The role of information and communications technology in facilitating and resisting gendered forms of political violence. In A. Segrave & Vitis (Ed.), *Gender, Technology and Violence*. New York: Routledge. 108

64 Abdul Aziz, Z. (2017). Op. cit.

65 Jeong, S. (2015). Op. cit.

66 Gabriella, B. (2017). The role of information and communications technology in facilitating and resisting gendered forms of political violence. In A. Segrave & Vitis (Ed.), *Gender, Technology and Violence*. New York: Routledge. 107.

67 Cheng, J., Michael, B., Cristian DNM, and Jure, L. (2017). Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions. *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing - CSCW '17*, 2017, 1217–30. [doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998213](https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998213)

study found that one's negative mood can persist and transmit trolling norms and behavior across multiple discussions. In this sense, negative norms against women and gender diverse people can be reinforced and persist in and permeate a community when left unchecked. Secondly, discussion around controversial topics including gender provides the context for trolling behaviour, indicating an extension of the entrenched sexist and misogynist mindset. The study then suggests that a better designed discussion platform can minimize the spread of trolling behavior.

Not only do they provide the resources and infrastructures to which it was deployed to cause harms, their terms of service shape the normative benchmark against which abusive behaviours and contents are accepted under the veil of freedom of expression.<sup>68</sup> Various reports also note that social media platforms' policies and solutions around online gender-based violence are inadequate and do not include the experience of affected communities, especially non-English-speaking women from the global South.<sup>69</sup> In India, survivors had very little faith in the support provided by Twitter and Facebook for the abuse they faced. Many had experienced unsuccessful reporting to social media and some even had their feminist contents removed.<sup>70</sup>

In the absence of any entity taking clear and proactive steps to eliminate online gender-based violence, women have organised and mobilised among themselves in pushing back and in responding to violence online. Emma Jane wrote that many contemporary feminist activists are pushing back via digital vigilantism or digilantism.<sup>71</sup> <sup>72</sup> The most common methodology is

"naming and shaming" and they exist on a spectrum—from reposting violating content to outing the individual and alerting aggressor's employer about the violating act.

Feminist digilantism offers a number of benefits. At the individual level, it can return an empowering sense of agency to the victim of online gender-based violence. Collectively, it can raise public awareness about individual incidents as well as the broader problem of online gender-based violence. Such tactics can also hold aggressors accountable for their actions when institutions fail to do so. However, the ethics of such approaches have been questioned and it can spiral out of control with mobs on both ends. It is by no way the long-term solution, and can also put women at further risk by exposing them to further online abuse and hate.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I do not doubt that there is a wealth of knowledge by feminists and activists on online gender-based violence in Malaysia. However, evidence of online gender-based violence is yet to be properly documented. Existing research in Malaysia remain qualitative and small in terms of data size, such as the research published by Juana Jaafar, Angela M. Kuga Thas and me. Continuous research and documentation of these cases are important in plugging the gap of a substantive evidence base that could contribute to the advocacy and education needed towards eliminating gender-based violence.

Most literature or advocacy on the relationship between online gender-based violence and freedom of expression argue that freedom of expression is not an absolute right and online gender-based violence is in itself a tool to silence women and therefore a violation of their freedom of expression. Current legal definition and understanding of freedom of expression and hate speech appear to have other priorities and the focus

68 Elena, P. (2017). Internet intermediaries and online gender-based violence. In A. Segrave & Vitis (Ed.), *Gender, Technology and Violence*. New York: Routledge. 63

69 Association for Progressive Communications. (2017). Online gender-based violence: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. Op. cit.

70 Anja, K., Richa K.P., & Shobha S.V. (2013). Op. cit.

71 Engaging in extrajudicial practices that are intended to punish attackers or otherwise bring them to account. It is also deployed by others in the broader space online.

72 Emma, A. J. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist digilantism. *Continuum: Journal of media and cultural studies*, Vol 30 (30), 248-297

73 Ibid.



on these issues often do not coincide with feminist values and women's experiences. While there is no one definition of hate speech accepted by all stakeholders, they generally specify race and/or religion and/or ethnicity as the primary defining features when it comes to hate speech.<sup>74</sup> There is no published works or research that analyses freedom of expression as a discourse of power— how it reinforces gender inequalities through unequal access to freedom of expression. Anecdotal cases documented by KRYSS Network have shown women's barriers to the enjoyment of their freedom of expression is often gendered and less visible in the current discourse on freedom of expression. Women are often subjected to self-censorship, made subservient to the dominant discourse, lack access to the right language,<sup>75</sup> face potential backlash and online gender-based violence. Though social media has reduced the barrier for women to express their opinions and thoughts, it does not necessary translate to a freedom equally enjoyed by women given the historical and structural inequalities that are also reproduced on technological platforms.

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74 Donna, L. L. (2007). A thorn by any other name: sexist discourse as hate speech. *Discourse & Society*, 18(6), 719–740

75 Girls who experienced non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit photographs often do not speak up or have no words to categorise the violation against them. Instead, they blamed themselves for being careless or promiscuous when subjected to the violence.

# 3

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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The research aims to address two dangerous assumptions, that: 1) the access to, and exercise of freedom of opinion and expression, is equal for all; and 2) the social media platforms are inherently emancipatory. Given how, historically, neutrality and egalitarian values in effect privilege cisgender men and cisgender men's experiences, such assumptions obscure rather than enable a diversity of voices and inevitably trivialise the cost of online gender-based violence. The research seeks to develop substantive evidence that could contribute to the development and refinement of arguments for women's equal access to freedom of expression over social media. It recognises how these online spaces can effectively restrict and limit women's public and political participation, and as a result, deny women the right to shape and re-shape the dominant narrative. More importantly, the research calls for attention to the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other social locations producing multiple standpoints. The research, therefore, focuses on unearthing the power dynamics of various forms of expressions and the intersecting identities of the women; how our current understanding and practice of freedom of expression on social media have allowed online gender-based violence to grow with impunity and to the extent of normalising extremism and gender-based violence, and; how freedom of expression is asserted by women and what are the subsequent responses to it.

At the heart of this research is the lived realities of women (including LBQ persons) who have been affected by online gender-based violence. In this regard, feminists have long criticised that women's experience of violence are interpreted and subsequently trivialised

by non-feminist observers and traditional research methodology. Evidence of these claims are evident in two local research on online gender-based violence – "Voice, Visibility and A Variety of Viciousness"<sup>76</sup> and "Preventing Violent Extremism Online"<sup>77</sup> – that found a deafening silence over the violence experienced by women and queers and the revelation of the diversity and lived experiences and identities.

The idea of feminist methodology is a product of the "second-wave" women's movement in the 1960s and early 1970s where consciousness raising was at the heart of the movement. Traditional research methodology that focuses on the tenets of verification, generalisation, objectivity, value-neutrality or the logic of scientific inquiry has been argued as rooted in a historical, positivist and androcentric paradigm that produces biased research and knowledge.<sup>78</sup>

Consciousness-raising as a feminist methodology is a mode of inquiry that challenges the notion that knowledge is only situated in the researcher and puts forward an alternative basis for knowledge through women's experience.<sup>79</sup> The lively and dynamic strands to feminism mean that there is no one singular approach to feminist methodology. This research adopts three unifying and essentialist principles of feminisms which

<sup>76</sup> Jaafar, J (2017). Op. cit.

<sup>77</sup> Lim, S. & Kuga Thas, A. M. (2018). Op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> Hesse-Biber, S.N. & Piatelli, D. (2007). Core Feminist Insights and Strategies on Authority, Representation, Truths, Reflexivity, and Ethics Across the Research Process. In A. Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research*. United State of America: Sage Publications, 143

<sup>79</sup> DeVault, M. L. (1996). Talking Back to Sociology: Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 22(1), 29–50.

are evident in the practice and methods of feminist research:

1. Multiple methodological framework
2. "Excavation" of voices and experiences
3. Intersectionality

### MULTIPLE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the feminists' critique of traditional research methodology and the missing knowledge from women's standpoint, feminist scholars are less inclined to rely on a singular framework as a research methodology. Accordingly, a multiple methodological framework is embraced as an approach to reduce production of narrow and selective pictures of human experience.<sup>80</sup>

The research adopted the following approaches to analysing the data:

1. Women's lived realities of online gender-based violence;
2. Women's standpoint, that is, their interpretation of their experiences of online gender-based violence; and
3. The aggressors' interpretation of their violating acts and contents, not to triangulate women's experiences of online gender-based violence or to draw generalisations, but to gain insights into the motivations of an aggressor.

The research employs qualitative interviews as its main research method for primary data collection, complemented by desk research and a participatory workshop approach to encourage interviewees to jointly analyse the data with the researcher.

### IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH THE WOMEN

Interview as a qualitative research method is selected to bring forward the women's narratives and experiences.

A total of 23 women were interviewed for the research from April to November 2019 in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, at a place of their preference, except for one who had requested for an online interview due to security reasons. The interviews took about one and a half hours each. Interviews were conducted individually with the exception of two women who attended a session together. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used for the interview process so that the women are better able to enter into the research process as an active agent and not merely as an object of scrutiny.<sup>81</sup> The questions centred around four broad topics:

- Expression and performance of self and usage of three main social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter and Instagram;
- Experience of exercising freedom of expression on social media;
- Experience of gender-based violence and aggression on social media; and
- Responses and impact of the violence and aggression.

### INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH THE AGGRESSORS

Five aggressors were interviewed using a hybrid of investigative journalism and in-depth interviews. For the purpose of this research, an aggressor is defined as someone who has been part of an online gender-based violence incident by making a deliberate expression on social media that caused violence or led to the distribution of violence against others. Aggressors were identified in the following ways:

- information given by the women interviewed in this research;
- information given by women's rights defenders who are not interviewed in this research;

<sup>80</sup> Stewart, A. J. & Cole E. R. (2007). Narratives and Numbers: Feminist Multiple Methods Research. In A. Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research*. United State of America: Sage Publications, 329

<sup>81</sup> Bloom, L. R. (1997). Locked in Uneasy Sisterhood: Reflections on Feminist Methodology and Research Relations. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 111-122

- identification of repeated aggressors by researcher through monitoring of online gender-based violence; and
- voluntary participation through researcher's announcement of a research on trolling behaviour on the researcher's personal Facebook account.

This second form of interview does not exactly fit within the traditional ethical boundaries of research, and one that uses unfamiliar tools with the aim of achieving the research objectives. The overall goal of investigative journalism is to expose some publicly relevant information and to "get to the bottom of what really happened";<sup>82</sup> while interview as a qualitative research method aims at gathering the lived experiences of the interviewees from their standpoint. In keeping with the above, the strategy to interview the aggressors was decided to unearth the experience of power holders in the perpetration of violence and harm online.

The adoption of such a method is propelled by the limited access to the conservative, supremacist and anti-feminist networks. The research of such kind is not common in Malaysia and inevitably implies that the researcher's entrance into such spaces is risky and fraught with ethical dilemmas. The researcher had to enter the space under the pretense of neutrality.<sup>83</sup> With the aggressors, the research was positioned as a "neutral" study of online discourse around polarised topics (i.e. LGBT, feminism, Malay Muslim supremacy, atheism etc.) in Malaysia and to learn about the different perspectives from different online users. In two interviews (one online text-based interview and one face-to-face interview), the researcher had to anonymise herself, partly for security, and partly to avoid the disposition of the researcher as a liberal, feminist and LGBT rights advocate.

Approaching the aggressors was not easy as the identified aggressors were not within the researcher's immediate network and they predominantly conversed in the colloquial Malay language.<sup>84</sup> To work around the lack of access, the researcher started with creating an anonymous Twitter account that follows the accounts perceived to be from the conservative group, through which the researcher discovered a server on Discord where several known trolls and meninists interact with one another around liberal and conservative ideology.

In addition, the researcher reached out to a list of aggressors through their Twitter. About a total of 30 interview requests had been shared, but only five responded favourably. Two others had indicated interest but decided to pull out at the eleventh hour. The questions for the aggressors differ slightly from the women in which they centred around these broad topics:

- Expression and performance of self and usage of three main social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter and Instagram;
- Experience of exercising freedom of expression on social media; and
- Experience of causing harm and violence on social media.

### PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP WITH THE WOMEN

The research convened a two-day participatory workshop with eight women of which seven of them were interviewed for the research with the exception of one who had declined the interview but agreed to attend the workshop. Invitations were sent to all the women interviewed but only seven could attend the workshop. Preliminary findings of the research were shared with the women in a peer-participatory setting. The research process positioned the women as co-producers of knowledge and hence, challenged the passivity

<sup>82</sup> Ballvé, T. (2019). Investigative Ethnography: A Spatial Approach To Economies Of Violence. *Geographical Review*, 1–14

<sup>83</sup> Given how historically neutrality and egalitarian values in effect privilege men and men's experiences, such assumptions tend to obscure more than enable a diversity of voices and inevitably trivialize the cost of online gender-based violence

<sup>84</sup> Malay language is the official national language for Malaysians. Yet, for many non-Malay ethnicity (including the researcher), many do not grow up speaking and the language is only used for official government affairs.



that women have been accorded in the knowledge production process as research participants.

The workshop was a fruitful session for everyone and the researcher was able to fill in gaps of the data and to dig deeper into the complexity of online gender-based violence and women's realities. Some of the women opened up even more during the discussion, shedding new light onto their experiences. An unexpected outcome was that the workshop became a healing process for most of us. Through sharing and questioning, we felt validated and less lonely in our experiences of online gender-based violence.

### DESK RESEARCH

The research findings were supplemented with desk research on incidents of online gender-based violence, including media reports and social media posts, relevant laws; programmes and mechanisms in providing redress for victims of online gender-based violence; and content regulation policy and mechanism put in place by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram addressing online gender-based violence.

### EXCAVATION OF VOICES AND EXPERIENCES

This research focuses on bringing to the forefront the often ignored, censored and suppressed voices, and to reveal the diversity of women's lived realities and the ideological mechanisms that have made women's experiences with online gender-based violence and their unequal access to freedom of expression invisible.<sup>85</sup>

A researcher's practice of listening is closely intertwined with the data and findings of the research and requires paying close attention to body language, speech, etc. It is important to allow that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours and toward people,

<sup>85</sup> DeVault, Marjorie L. (1996), Op. cit.

knowledges, and experiences that have been overlooked and invalidated.<sup>86</sup>

This is especially important when women as a category is diverse and never monolithic. Audre Lorde has long written on the harm of Anglo women's inability to listen actively to the experiences of women of colour with racism, heterosexism and economic exploitation.<sup>87</sup> When these voices and experiences are dismissed, we fail to create knowledge and resources that challenge the status quo which exacerbated the harms and violence. We risk producing data and research that are colonising rather than liberating because they produce the dominant perspective.<sup>88</sup> It is important for the researcher, as a middle-class cisgender, heterosexual woman, of Chinese ethnicity, to hold herself accountable to recognise the various forms of violence and oppression that characterise the realities and experiences of women different from herself.

### INTERSECTIONALITY

The third principle is intersectionality and the recognition of the limitation of gender as a single analytical category. Intersectionality considers how women themselves are differently positioned within multiple axes of power that in turn influences how they embody gender.<sup>89</sup> This approach is especially pertinent to where Malaysia is situated today—the polarisation based on political, religious, ethnic and socio-economic disparity.

To address the complexity and intersectionality of women's experiences, the research adopted a mix of intracategorical and anticategorical approach,

<sup>86</sup> DeVault, M. L. & Gross, G. (2007). Feminist Interviewing: Experience, Talk and Knowledge. In A. Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research*. United State of America: Sage Publications. 183

<sup>87</sup> Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. New York: Crossing Press

<sup>88</sup> DeVault, M. L. & Gross, G. (2007). Op. cit.

<sup>89</sup> The term was first highlighted by Kimberle Crenshaw in Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. 139-167

as addressed by Leslie McCall.<sup>90</sup> An intracategorical approach acknowledges that social categories produce stable and lasting power relations for women and yet recognise the importance to maintain a critical stance towards these categories. This approach focuses on two or more social categories and considers the relationships between them. An anticategorical approach does not employ fixed categories and considers social life as too irreducibly complex and overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures. This approach recognises that women strategically choose among performances of gender, race, and class depending on context and situation. Categories are unstable and mean different things from moment to moment. The point is not to dismiss the importance of social categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced and resisted in everyday life.<sup>91</sup>

The researcher identified women and lesbian, bisexual, transwomen and queer (LBTQ) women as two main categories of research participants for the research. However, the researcher also recognises that the separation of categories between women and LBTQ is a misleading construct and implies that the LBTQ are not women. The separation is used explicitly to articulate the broader structural dynamics that tend to invalidate and make invisible the narratives of LBTQ women.

Briefly, the breakdown of categories for the women interviewed are:-

GENDER IDENTITY	
Cis woman	17
Trans woman	3
Non Binary	3

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	
Heterosexual	11
Bisexual	3
Lesbian	8

AGE	
17 – 19 years old	2
20 – 29 years old	9
30 – 39 years old	11
40 – 49 years old	1

Beyond this, the women in both categories are presented in all their details and complexity. The use of this approach stemmed from the failure of gender-based research “to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations”.<sup>92</sup>

Further, current gender-based and raced-based research would not adequately account for the experience of how women perform themselves on social media and how the mediated-self interacts with situated power dynamics. Social media allows women to negotiate their identities online strategically by customising user name, profile picture, description, use of hashtag, etc. By choosing a profile picture showing herself wearing a headscarf or of her cat, the same woman could receive, and even invite or encourage, different treatment for her expression. This shows how gender, race and religion are accomplished through situated interactions even as women are simultaneously subjected to structural inequalities.

### RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

As with all research, this research has its limitations and biases. It is not the intention of this research to be representative of the female population in Malaysia. The sample size of 23 women reflect neither the population of more than 15.3 million women<sup>93</sup> in Malaysia nor the

90 McCall, L. (2005). The Complexity of Intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(2). 1771-1800

91 Misra, J. (2018). Categories, Structures, and Intersectional Theory. In A. Messerschmidt, W. J., Messner, M. A., & Connell, R (Ed.), *Gender Reckoning*. New York: New York University Press.

92 McCall, L. (2005). Op. cit.

93 Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2019). Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2018-2019. [dosm.gov.my/vi/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=155&bul\\_id=aWJZRk4UEdKcUZpT2tVT090Snpydz09&menu\\_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4THUUT09](https://dosm.gov.my/vi/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=155&bul_id=aWJZRk4UEdKcUZpT2tVT090Snpydz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4THUUT09)

diversity of experiences and backgrounds of women's lived realities of expression. The number also reflects the concentration of population in the two biggest locations of Malaysia. Therefore, the uneven geographical distribution of individuals participating in the research is expected:-

- 16 of the women are born and bred in Selangor/Kuala Lumpur;
- Three of the women are raised outside of Selangor/Kuala Lumpur in peninsular Malaysia but are currently living in Selangor/Kuala Lumpur;
- Two of them were born and raised in East Malaysia and are currently living in Selangor/Kuala Lumpur;
- One of them was raised overseas and is currently living and working in Selangor/Kuala Lumpur; and
- One of them was raised in the state of Pahang<sup>94</sup> and is currently living and staying in the same state.

The geographical distribution of the women is expected to have an impact on their usage and experience of social media due to the different religious laws at state-level,<sup>95</sup> accessibility and speed of the internet, and cultural practices by the local communities. For example, a woman who was raised in Terengganu had kept her trans identity anonymised due to the conservativeness of the community there, including blocking her social media accounts from her family members who continue to reside in Terengganu. She is, however, able to present her trans self at her workplace in Kuala Lumpur.

Another limitation is the main language used in the interviews as there exists a correlation between language and social class in Malaysia. While English is widely spoken in Malaysia, it is also not the first language for many women in Malaysia and remains a language accessible to urban folks and those who have better access to education. Throughout the conduct

of the interviews, at least five women have shared that the attacks are worse when the content is shared in the Malay language; and one had shared that the content posted in two different languages would attract different treatment. The researcher is also limited by her own language barriers. While the researcher is fluent in the Mandarin and Malay languages, the language used to categorise online gender-based violence or to name the violations are predominantly known to the researcher in English only. At this stage, very little is known about the Chinese, Tamil, Indigenous language-speaking communities and their responses to similar experiences of online gender-based violence.

Nonetheless, the research is not designed to be representative of all women in various Malaysian states and communities, but to investigate in detail the uneven access to freedom of expression by women on social media. Women's freedom of expression is defined as freedom of opinion and expression, including expression in language, dressing and mannerisms. The nuances of background and languages should, however, be taken up in future research.

The workshop was unfortunately attended by only eight women (where one of the women had declined to be interviewed but agreed to be part of the workshop), representing 40 per cent of the women interviewed. Some of them were unable to attend due to clashing appointments and some pulled out at the eleventh hour. The researcher is mindful that the responses shared during the workshop do not reflect the opinions of all the women in this research.

The researcher acknowledges that the small sample size for the aggressors is not an adequate representation of the aggressor's ecosystem in Malaysia.

- Four of them were born and raised in Selangor/Kuala Lumpur and are currently living in the same locations except for two—one is working in Singapore and the other is currently studying in East Malaysia;

<sup>94</sup> Pahang is the third largest state in Malaysia and is geographically located in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia.

<sup>95</sup> In Malaysia, Shariah law is regulated by state legislative assemblies, the law is published within the respective state gazettes, except for the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, in which the Islamic law is enacted by the Parliament. [nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Researching\\_Islamic\\_Law\\_Malaysian\\_Sources.html](http://nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Researching_Islamic_Law_Malaysian_Sources.html)

- One of them is born and raised in East Malaysia and at the time of the interview, was planning to move back to East Malaysia from Kuala Lumpur.

The researcher is also mindful of the use of the term “aggressors” to categorise the individual and how the term simplifies an aggressor’s intersectional vulnerabilities and identities. Gaining trust with the aggressors was a challenge for the researcher due to “unfamiliarity” with the aggressors’ ideological standpoint and worldview. This is especially when four out of five of the aggressors were brought up as Malay Muslim, an identity that is closely intertwined with the dominant narrative and the socio-cultural, economic and political landscape in Malaysia. Raised in a Chinese Buddhist family, the researcher is an outsider and as a feminist activist, the researcher is the very antithesis to their conservative belief system when it comes to gender roles and LGBTQ persons’ rights. It was also a challenge for the researcher to delve deeper into their motivations in attacking another on social media without sounding like their responses are policed.

# 4

## **PART 1: EXPRESSION OF THE (DIGITAL) SELF**

# EXPRESSION OF THE (DIGITAL) SELF

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Our digital self and bodies are constructed through the choice of name (including the emoticon that comes with it), visual photographs, profile description, friends or followers list, and the type of contents we share. Social media and network infrastructure are mediating our bodies, identities, expressions and ideas in ways that are unprecedented, and hence, accord new ways through which women can express themselves. However, this does not mean women are suddenly liberated and free to engage publicly and politically. Having more ways to express oneself and using these, merely means a heightened visibility of what women are expressing, but still subject to the alternate technological mode of society which takes on the unequal power dynamics of existing social and gender norms.

KRYSS Network's monitoring of online gender-based violence and many other research have shown that women have exercised self-censorship or stopped using the platforms as a result of the abuse. This research studies the 23 women who are still online and active in self-expression even after the violence they experienced. The next part of the chapter will explore in depth how women express and perform themselves on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram despite the risk of online gender-based violence; how do they remain visible online while managing their vulnerabilities and social precarity; how are their expression and performance of self shaped and conditioned by digital culture and technologies; how do the women relate to one another through the mediated self and what are the inherent power dynamics in their access to freedom of expression online.

## PRECARIOUS LIFE: WOMEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Jabala, of mixed Malay-Chinese ethnicity, is in her early thirties. She has gone through more than five Facebook accounts so far. Her very first Facebook account (now defunct) was where she used her actual name and photographs, and where she frequently made public posts on various issues i.e. politics, religion and women's rights. Increasingly, she begun getting more and more attacks from strangers online. To circumvent that, she created an anonymised male-presenting Facebook account using a fantasy name<sup>96</sup> to enable her to express herself without connecting back to her actual Facebook account vis-à-vis her embodied self. True enough, she noticed the differential treatment between presenting herself as female and male online. When she used her female-presenting account, people attacked her based on her identity as a woman and a fat person. When she criticised discriminatory religious practices in Islam, she was assumed to be a Chinese-Christian and attacked by others based on that racial slur. However, with a male-presenting account, she was less likely to be attacked for being a "man" and she was able to engage with others based on the merits of the argument.

In Jabala's case, social media allows her certain control and agency over the construction of her digital self, and arguably, accords her some level of protection by allowing her to anonymise aspects of her identity that make her vulnerable and a target for online gender-based violence. In deciding how she presents herself

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<sup>96</sup> Jabala used names commonly found in games or fantasy stories, where others can obviously tell it is not the person's actual name.

to online audiences and what part of her identity she wishes to anonymise, she makes a series of decisions guided and conditioned by her existing experiences and societal labels as an opinionated, fat, Chinese-Muslim woman.

Understanding our digital identities and online aggressions cannot be done with a simplistic binary framework of online/offline, virtual/physical, real/unreal and meaningful/trivial. The manner in which people interact and relate to one another online is closely intertwined with our physical world. The separation of the online and offline self is, in fact, fictitious. However, the authenticity and realness of a digital identity is always in question; very much similar to how the harm experienced by women from online gender-based violence is seen as “not real”. The physically isolated self presented through technology is often presumed to have no connection to our physical bodies, and so, these bodies are not treated as “real” and therefore, technically unable to experience any “real” harm online. Yet, the impact of online gender-based violence on a person has physical, emotional and psychological manifestations.

All the women in the research expressed a shared sense of fear and vulnerability on social media. They unsurprisingly shared similar hopes of safer online spaces for women. *“I hope we don’t need more escalated incidents for people to realise it’s actually a serious issue. I just don’t wish we have to read news about a woman being beaten because she shares her opinions on Twitter”, said Amy. Suzie thinks that the internet is no longer a safe space for women. “You see women getting harassed every day on social media. I wish people trust us when we say that this is happening to us and when we say that we have much more negative experience than you do. It is so tiring,”* said Suzie. The women who participated in the research, despite their various backgrounds, shared the common experience of abuses, harassments and violence on social media, albeit at different rates of intensity and severity depending on the intersectionality of one’s identity.

Precarity, as explained by scholar Judith Butler, is directly linked with gender norms —“those who do not live their lives in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence.”<sup>97</sup> Gender norms define how women should express, behave and socialise with others. They also determine how women are treated everywhere—at home, in Parliament, at the workplace and on social media too. It does not only affect our individual identity. Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public spaces;<sup>98</sup> who is at heightened risk to be abused, doxxed, trolled and threatened online; and who will fail to be protected by the law, the police and the social media platforms. Those who are perceived to be gender non-conforming are likely to be particularly vulnerable and precarious.<sup>99</sup> Social media is an interesting space where gender norms are persistent and yet there remain spaces where women can play a role in disrupting normative gender roles and discriminatory practices against women.

Throughout the interviews, all the women spoke about online gender-based violence as inevitable to their existence on social media and in life generally. In my interview with Lily, when asked about a recent experience of online gender-based violence, she found it difficult to recall one. *“It (online gender-based violence) feels so commonplace that the mind doesn’t even register it anymore. The ones I tend to remember are the ones that happen early on, when it was still kind of shocking”,* said Lily. This heightened risk of violence also means less women are willing to express themselves in ways that are outside of the norms. Hanna often talks about the rights as a Muslim woman and contextualises these against her own lived experience as a woman, lawyer, mother and wife. She receives private messages from her followers on Facebook every now and then. They are mostly home makers who would thank her for sharing

97 Butler, J. (2009). Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics. *AIBR. Revista De Antropología Iberoamericana*, 04(03)

98 Ibid

99 Ibid



as many of them do not have the courage to defy the patriarch and patriarchal norms in their families.

The shared sense of vulnerabilities and precarity among women has also led to a sense of dependency and solidarity among women on social media. In Hanna's case, her outward expression of her resistance towards discriminatory practices in Islam provides an avenue through which, women who experience the same oppression, can connect. There is strength in that connection and to know that one is not alone.

### NEGOTIATION AND COMPARTMENTALISATION OF VULNERABILITIES

Women's visibility and expression in public spaces are essential in the progression for full access to their human rights and freedom. While women are accorded the opportunities for more visibility and expression, the prevailing gender and patriarchal norms, including sexism and misogyny, negatively affects how they are heard or seen. These biased norms force women to navigate between opportunities and risks through the mediated performance of self.

Karima, in her mid-thirties, is currently working in the media industry. She observes that her social media presence has evolved with her change in career from education to media professional. This also means that Karima is moving herself into a more open and public realm. When social media was first gaining popularity in Malaysia, Karima did not sign up or maintain any social media accounts for five to six years. It was only around year 2010 that she decided that a social media presence was needed to support her work in the media industry. She is strategic about how she performs and expresses herself on her Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where she mostly shares contents around political, economic and social justice from a feminist perspective.

As a woman who works on current and political affairs, Karima has in some way restricted herself from what she makes public. She shared that she is unable to share her personal fitness related content because of how it could

affect the perception of potential working partners of her. Her fitness-related content would involve her dressing in sport attire that is often sexualized and deemed as inappropriate for the more serious news or business. *"I do feel restricted but I realise the value I add to my own professional network by being a little more formal in the interaction and the posts that I have on my social media"*, said Karima. *"It is an unfortunate nature of the digital space. I wish I can just be myself and I would be seen on the merits and values of my work"*, said Karima.

Karima's visibility as a professional is managed and negotiated within the mainstream discourse and the constructed image of the professional woman. It also alludes to the broader gender stereotypes which obstruct women's ability to fully express themselves. Even though there has been some (but not much) progression in women's public and political participation, women who are vocal politically, including taking a clear stand on human rights issues and social injustices, or who are comfortable with their sexuality and express it, are treated as "women who should be controlled".

Like Karima, some of the other women who were interviewed for the research have used social media for the very purpose of professional networking and self-representation. Jabala shared that maintaining a professional Facebook account of herself is needed in her work to establish a professional network and to be better able to avail of opportunities. As a result of her attempt to maintain that professional front, she finds herself having to be more careful with what she says on Facebook and more cautious in curating her friends list.

Work and professional affairs are what Lily does not show on her social media profiles. Lily, in her mid-thirties, works in the art industry and she never mention where she works on her Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. As a publicly queer person on social media, she is aware that her stance and opinion online can be deemed aggressive by others and that could affect her employment opportunities. She worries that her employer may perceive her as unprofessional for her expressions. She takes this extra care to manage the risk

of aggressors targeting her workplace or her colleagues. The above stories show that women are constantly negotiating with and around patriarchal values and norms to maintain their visibility on social media. Women's gender roles in the public sphere is highly ordered by cultural values and societal expectations, which are often patriarchal and discriminatory. When our lives are so heavily regulated by a set of rules and codes that enforces gender norms and celebrate male dominance over females, women often find themselves having to choose their battles in order to advance their positions and their activism in society. In Karima's and Jabala's cases, to present themselves as professional—they have to negotiate the way they identify and present themselves, oftentimes censoring or fragmenting part of themselves in order to gain access to public and political spaces. In Lily's case, she is unable to speak about her profession on social media, in exchange for the freedom to express her political self. Understanding how women navigate patriarchal values and norms in the exercise of their freedom of expression provides important insight into the barriers faced by women in realising their full access to equality and this freedom.

### THE MULTIPLE SELF ON INSTAGRAM, TWITTER AND FACEBOOK

From the interviews with the women, it was evidently clear that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are used for more than just information, communication and dialogue. I asked the women during the interviews what social media do they use and for what purposes. Although I did not ask explicitly if there is a difference in terms of their personality on different platforms, all of them elaborated on their self-expression over Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as different; and to some extent, some differences between their personality online and offline.

Facebook and Twitter are the two platforms talked about the most during the interviews. It is where most of the women perform and express their political self. *"Twitter is where all the action is, where I do my activism"*, said Adeela. She went on to describe Instagram as

where she put up random pictures. When asked if she used Instagram for her activism, she said, *"most of my activism are [expressed in] words rather than images, that's the reason why I didn't choose [to use] Instagram [for my activism]."* Jabala, however, would sometimes make political statements on Instagram using a combination of images, graphic and text *"to tell a story"*. She describes her content on Instagram as *"the mild, curated ones"* and not as *"aggressive"* (explicit and confrontational) as her words on Facebook.

Interestingly, Facebook and Twitter were constantly compared to one another by all the women, while Instagram was not compared to any other platform. This could be because of how they used these platforms very differently. Instagram is perceived as a platform for leisure activities and the non-political performance of self, whereas Facebook and Twitter are where they express their political thoughts.

Our online identities are fragmented and spread across different social media sites. When the self is mediated through digital technologies, the construction and expression of the self is conditioned and shaped by the techno-social processes of each platform. As a point of departure for analysis, it is not useful to examine the self as isolated and separated persons on these various platforms. The next part of the research findings show the self as multifaceted and explain the techno-socio features that lead to the fragmentation of the self.

### THAT INSTAGRAMMABLE LIFE

Instagram's focus on images makes the social media platform particularly powerful for self-expression through selfies, image-curating and self-branding. Veeda always shows her cheerful side on Instagram. *"I feel like that's the nature of Instagram, like you want to share happiness. It is kind of hard to share sadness in the form of photos and videos"*, said Veeda. Nina thinks that she, like many others, wants to show the perfect side of her life, as in when she is traveling, eating delicious food or going to the spa. Yan similarly is often critical as to what she posts on Instagram and she thinks it is because

she wants people to like her contents. Katherine echoed the same sentiment, *“my Instagram is more for fun, cat pictures, you know, food pictures, that’s it. I don’t really use it to share my opinions . . . , it’s really not about that.”*

In some of my interviews, Instagram was treated by the women as a non-political platform or a space for trivial narratives: *“There is nothing much to see on my Instagram”* ; *“My Instagram is just random—when I go out, what I am wearing, family photos, not anything that can attract controversy. Just normal”*. There is very little thought or reflection on the intersection of this visual narrative based platform with our activism and politics.<sup>100</sup> It strongly suggests that Instagram in its design as a social media platform that uses visuals as its texts of communication, exploits this form of media to its advantage knowing that these images will be treated as an extension of their users’ identities and that people would naturally want to have images associated with looking and feeling good.

Instagram is more than just images, however, and has everything to do with gender norms and the commodification of our expression. The desire to curate a better self on Instagram is guided by the value given by the audience and suitability for public consumption. This is more apparent with the younger women who were interviewed. Gwen, who is in her early twenties, is currently studying in university, described herself as being stuck in the “Instagram trap” when she was around 17 years-old. She shared the following:-

*“I want to have the clout, I want to be that Instagram girl. It took a very long time to reconcile that many parts of me are okay. And I don’t have to [be] this imagined version of what I think I should post. Like you go on Instagram... people in my age group are graduating now, going on trips, doing their gap year. I think if I was a bit younger, I would have felt pressured to keep up with posting that type of content. But now I don’t. Now I just*

*share what makes me happy.”*

Mia, 18 years old, has found ways in which she can navigate her identities and expression because of the digital culture on Instagram and by having dual accounts, Finsta and Rinsta. For her, her Rinsta (shorthand for “real-Instagram”) account which has a higher number of followers is where she posts more polished and populist visual content—photographs which she considers *safe* and which she thinks will please most people on her Rinsta. She uses her Finsta (shorthand for “fake-Instagram”) account as her second Instagram account and which is reserved only for viewing by a smaller group of people. Here, she posts unfiltered and candid expressions of herself. Mia believes that she is more expressive, vulnerable on an emotional level on her Finsta and where she *can show her actual self*. This is where she often talks about women’s rights, feminism and social justice issues. Mia thinks these are the topics she feels safe sharing on her Finsta and if she were to share them on her Rinsta, her followers may be offended. When asked to elaborate further, she thinks it is because of her upbringing and the way her friends are. She wasn’t allowed to talk about many things and that’s what her normal account is all about *“the best version of myself—like, my best day, my best hair, my best friends, or like, funny jokes”*.

For years, Instagram positioned itself as a place for positive, aspirational content – for shopping, connecting with friends, and following contents of your interest.<sup>101</sup> Instagram facilitates a somewhat compulsory performance of the best version of ourselves and these standards are predominantly dictated through the lens of your audience or the public, forcing other users to conform in order to “fit in”. This in itself is a barrier to many women from expressing a part of themselves that do not conform to gender norms. Instagram was a place where Suzie, who is in her late twenties, archived her happy memories including those with her former partners. She thinks it is natural to want to share your

<sup>100</sup> The researcher notes that this may be different now after the resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter movement following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 where they have been an increase of social justice content on Instagram.

<sup>101</sup> Lorenz, T. (15 October, 2018). Instagram has a massive harassment problem. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/instagram-has-massive-harassment-problem/572890/>

happiness on your Instagram to your followers. However, the increased vile attacks against her online has a chilling effect on her. Suzie is visibly a Malay Muslim lesbian woman on Twitter, and yet, being visibly queer in the medium of visual content and on a different platform poses heighten risk to Suzie and her former partners. She fears that her photographs with her partner will be weaponised against her and circulated without her consent. Therefore, she recently took down many photographs that would show herself as a lesbian.

Preya, in their (preferred pronoun) early twenties, of Indian ethnicity, is assigned male at birth but identifies as a trans feminine<sup>102</sup>. They enjoys wearing makeup but is afraid to show this side of them on their public Instagram account. Preya said, *“I want people to see my makeup and I think I got pretty good at it and I want to post it for affirmation”*. They knows even though the photographs/videos of them wearing makeup are aesthetically appealing and “instagrammable”, these photographs will not be received well by the public. They cannot take the risk of going public with their photographs of them with makeup because there is a risk that their parents may find out. To work around this risk, they set up a private Instagram account exclusively for a few close friends who know about their gender identity where they feels safe to express their transfeminine self.

Some of the women in this interview will cautiously curate their visual narratives on Instagram in presenting a mediated-self. Some have said that they do not curate a personality on Instagram, but regardless, would share anything that is deemed funny and memorable. Instagram users are caught up in the cycle of conspicuous production and consumption, wherein users will display their social status by posting images of luxury vacations or other images that depict luxury, and may be performed with the intent of gaining more likes

while being seen as having a tasteful and good life.<sup>103</sup> What is being mediated is not just personal expression, but a form of cultural expression that conforms to traditional prescriptions for femininity, gender norms, classist norms, capitalist values, and heteronormativity. In this instance, the experiences of Suzie and Preya reaffirm the inherent inequality in the “instagrammable” culture.

### INTERSECTION OF ANONYMITY AND SELF-EXPRESSIONS

As a starting point of discussion, the basic features of Facebook and Twitter will be examined to help in understanding to what extent our self-expression is conditioned and shaped by the techno-social processes of these two platforms. On Facebook, your network is named as “friends”, while on Twitter, you have “followers”. This means that you have to make a request to be friend with someone on Facebook, which gives the impression that it is a more personalised and deliberate act by the user, and at the same time, exclusive, because without “befriending” a person, you will not be able to see their profiles and posts unless it has been made public or it is a Facebook Page<sup>104</sup>. While on Twitter, as long as it is a public profile, you can follow the other person without needing their permission. For private accounts on Twitter, you have to first make a request to follow and the other person will either accept or deny the request. Both Facebook and Twitter allow their users to block undesired accounts or followers.

Facebook has a profile page where you can put up your name, photograph, short bio with 101 characters, occupation, education, current city, relationship status and other personal details. You may also choose to include your employment and educational background

<sup>103</sup> Kane, X. F. (2018). From Accumulation to Alienation: Marx and Veblen, in A. Fuchs, C. (Ed), *Social Capital Online*. United Kingdom: University of Westminster. [library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/123207bc-8dac-48b1-b4fe-1409caa535dc/UWP-020-faucher.pdf](https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/123207bc-8dac-48b1-b4fe-1409caa535dc/UWP-020-faucher.pdf).

<sup>104</sup> Pages are places on Facebook where artists, public figures, businesses, brands, organizations and non-profits can connect with their fans or customers. When someone likes or follows a Page on Facebook, they can start seeing updates from that Page in their News Feed.

<sup>102</sup> Trans feminine is a term used to describe transgender people who were assigned male at birth, but identify with femininity to a greater extent than with masculinity.

which will allow your friends to learn about some of your personal life history. Your profile is accessible to your Friends. On Facebook, your timeline is where you post a snapshot of what you went through, or where you are, or your thoughts. These can take the form of comments, pictures, videos, sharing of an article, and so on. There is a function where you can block someone or a group of people from seeing certain posts from you, e.g. you may want to block your parents from seeing a specific post, but it does not mean that they will not find out about it from a mutual “friend”.

The ability to curate your audience is not a feature that is available on Twitter. Twitter does not have an extensive profile page like Facebook. Once you click into a person’s Twitter homepage, you will find their page with profile photograph, a short bio with not more than 160 characters, location, birthdate and website. Your homepage will also contain all your tweets in chronological order.

Most of the women who were interviewed had Facebook accounts for the longest time among all of their social media accounts, although they each joined the platform in different years and stages of life. It is one of the most heavily criticised platforms by the women. Of the 23 women interviewed, four of them have stopped using Facebook and two of them have never signed up for a Facebook account. Katherine stopped using Facebook two years ago. Her decision to leave the social media platform was propelled by the overwhelming xenophobic comments and the barrage of harassment over her posts defending migrant workers and refugees in Malaysia. She described Facebook as a conservative nest. She had considered deleting her Facebook account but her parent advised her to leave it there as it may one day be useful if she wished to get in touch again with anyone on Facebook.

Of the three platforms, Facebook is the one that carries most of the women’s embodied experiences and identities, and it is also over this platform, that people who are “friends” are known to them personally. Interestingly, for that reason, it presents a barrier to women’s equal access to and exercise of their freedom of expression.

Adeela sees Facebook as an “all-encompassing” social media that knows everything about our lives. She explained, *“a lot of other online platforms have started to integrate logins using your Facebook ID, and I am not too comfortable with that, especially when you want to post something controversial on Facebook, that’s going to be the end of you. Eventually it feels a bit intrusive, so I decided to limit my use of Facebook.”* Comparatively, Adeela thinks that Twitter does not ask for much personal details, unlike the real name policy on Facebook. This is an important distinction when the women’s expressions are policed in multifaceted ways, and retaining anonymity at some levels would allow the expression of one’s prohibited self.

Sadia, who is in her late twenties, is a Chinese Muslim revert<sup>105</sup> and was raised as a Buddhist by her family. She has to keep her reversion hidden from her family. When she signed up for her Twitter account in 2017, she knew very well that she had to use a name that is not identifiable to her embodied self, even though her initial intention of signing up for Twitter was to consume news and receive updates on current affairs. Gradually, Sadia realised that Twitter is a space where she can share her reversion journey, Islamic teachings, and positive learnings in life. *“My family might not be happy with the fact that I changed my religion, that might cost me a lot and cause a huge drama”*, said Sadia. Her partner and housemate are the only two persons who know about her dual existence.

Katherine, who is in her mid-twenties, a soon-to-be-lawyer, is semi-anonymous and visibly a Malay Muslim woman on Twitter. She uses her first name, followed by a pseudonym. Although she uses her actual photograph as her profile picture on Twitter, she drew funny cat features on her face, so that it is harder to identify her. Her decisions on her name and photograph were initially made for fun. However, after a series of trolling and violent attacks in response to her tweets, she figured it

<sup>105</sup> In my interview with Sadia, she referred to herself as a Muslim revert instead of a convert. She sees her embracement of Islam as a return to a former condition or belief. A revert is returning back to that innate faith to which they were connected as young children, before being led away. <https://www.learnreligions.com/convert-or-revert-to-islam-2004197>

is wiser to stay semi-anonymous. *“I think it’s better if I just stay semi-anonymous on Twitter because I did get a few threats telling me oh, I should be careful, I should watch my back”,* said Katherine. Annoyingly to her, her choice of using a pseudonym led to condescending comments from her attackers. Once she was called *adik* by a known Twitter user who is her age. *“‘Adik’ is like someone younger, like you’re talking to someone younger than you, who’s seen as less knowledgeable”,* said Katherine.

While these women have opted to use anonymity to exercise their freedom of expression of the self, identity, opinions and thoughts, their choice in effect ensures access that may have been denied of them because of gender norms, gender stereotypes and unequal gender-power dynamics. However, the aggressors are quick to exploit this very same protection accorded through anonymity. Two out of five of the aggressors opted for an anonymous identity on Twitter. To some extent, staying anonymous has emboldened them and better enabled them to perpetuate violence.

Haleem, who is in his early twenties, is currently studying in a local university and Twitter is the only social media platform where he stays anonymous. He shared that he comes from a religious family and he knew that his family and friends will not approve of his use of curse words on Twitter. On his Instagram, he would post personal stories and sometimes express his opinions around current issues, but never in the way he does so on Twitter. With this anonymity, he feels safe. In his words, *“I am more aggressive on Twitter, and more lenient in the physical world. Because it involves eye contact and people would try to avoid unnecessary fights”*. Haleem is determined to strengthen the conservative discourse and counter the liberal, LGBTQ and feminist discourse on Twitter.

Anonymity is vital to women, especially women from marginalised or vulnerable communities, where part of their identity is not accepted by their family and society. Anonymity is a key condition for Sadia to express herself as a *muallaf*, and for Katherine to speak up against an oppressive regime as a Malay Muslim. In some cases,

it is simply because the women wish to be taken more seriously, especially for their political expression.

While the harm and abuse coming from anonymous aggressors should not be dismissed, the use of their real names do not stop the three other aggressors from committing aggression online. In fact, in Albert’s case, he would troll others on Twitter and Facebook using his birth name, and he felt that because of its generic nature, he is accorded some level of anonymity. *“There probably are thousands of persons in Malaysia with the same name. So they can’t trace back to me, even if they you want to, it will probably be harder”,* said Albert. However, seeing how people are doxxed and attacked online following digital vigilantism, it makes Albert think twice before posting any comments online. He is afraid that he may lose his job or people may threaten his family as a result of his online comments. In this instance, it is the sense of impunity and knowing that they can get away with the abuse that underlies the violence, and anonymity is a means through which they can achieve that. This is especially true when the harassment and violence is legitimised by media, religious authorities, country leaders and those with power to influence public sentiment and discourse.

## INTERSECTION OF NETWORK AND SELF-EXPRESSIONS

The idea of social media as a space for expression cannot be questioned without placing our expressions and identities within the context of surveillance through spectatorship and interactions with others on social media.<sup>106</sup> We are constantly cognisant of our environment and those around us, consciously and unconsciously managing our expression and performance based on the realities and perceived risks of our environment. These processes of following and friending one another, interacting, replying etc. are part of our expression and performance of self through which we relate and find

<sup>106</sup> Cover, R. (2012). Performing and undoing identity online: Social networking, identity theories and the incompatibility of online profiles and friendship regimes. *Convergence*, 18(2), 177–193.



sense of belonging with one another. The “who I am” and “what to express or what can be expressed” are not question and answer in isolation but rather through the effect of the cultural discourse, structures and practices within the network. Our social network and context can force us to make very deliberate and conscious decisions for our expression and self-censorship which are constantly negotiated.

It was apparent from the interviews that one distinctive difference between Facebook and Twitter is the network of friends/followers they have. This has significant impact on the women’s ability to fully express themselves over these platforms. Facebook is one of the online spaces where most of the people they know in real life were added as “friend” and the platform has become a sort of digital archive of all the people users know in their lives. Siva Vaidhyathan describes this as “the great scramble” of our social, commercial and political worlds.<sup>107</sup> To a certain extent, Facebook is a platform where most of the women’s social context collapses. Even though there is a function of segregating our “friends” on the platform, only one woman in this research used that function. A technical feature to neatly segregate our social network does not reflect the fluid, dynamic and complex nature of our network and relationships. Many of the women interviewed expressed Facebook fatigue due to the collision of different social contexts and the amount of hate and violence they observed and experienced on the platform.

One other consistent theme that kept recurring in the interviews is the presence of family members on their Facebook accounts. The presence of family members on their social media accounts has rendered the site suitable for social surveillance and therefore has a major influence on how they perform or express themselves on Facebook.

Treena, who is in her mid-twenties, uses Facebook for the specific purpose of maintaining a presence for her family members who live in a different state because

they are mostly active on Facebook. Treena left her home in East Malaysia and moved to the capital city Kuala Lumpur for work three years ago. She describes her Facebook as her “*personality to her family...so you don’t share stuff like gender identity, sexual orientation*”. She would post her everyday mundane life once a week, to show her family members that she is doing well in Kuala Lumpur. The same photograph of herself would receive contrasting responses on Facebook and Twitter. On Facebook, her family members would comment rudely on her body size whereas on Twitter she would receive affirmation from her followers.

Two years ago, she posted a photograph of herself holding a cigarette on Facebook and it became an issue with her family members. Her aunties and cousins started calling her mother, complaining to her about Treena’s transgression – “*This is the problem when you are not staying with your family, we cannot control your life, we cannot tell you that it is wrong*”, Treena recounted her mother’s words. She eventually deleted the photograph because she did not want to upset her mother any further. She also made the decision to unfriend those family members who barraged her. Because of the incident, she did not travel home for Hari Raya (Aidil Fitri; the day celebrated after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan) the year that it happened. Two things have changed after the incident for Treena. First, it changed how she views Facebook, and; the implications of that for her relationship dynamics between her family and herself. She also stopped posting anything personal on Facebook, especially no photographs or selfies. “*I realised that Facebook is not where I want to show my real life*”, said Treena.

Zainab , who is in her mid-thirties, of Malay ethnicity, has family members living in a different state, took the precaution of blocking all her family members across all her social media accounts, including Facebook from the very beginning. She knew from day one that her family will not accept her as a transwoman. She did not block her sister initially until her sister *tegur* (Translation: reprimand) her that she shouldn’t post her photograph as a woman. “*It was then that I knew that they are not going to accept me for my current life right now, might*

107 Vaidhyathan, S. (2018). Op. cit.



as well just block them”, said Zainab.

Family is the ultimate construct of heteronormativity that controls its members in the name of love. Facebook enables that extension of heteronormative control over them by virtue of the network online and visibility of a mediated self.

### A DIFFERENTLY INTIMATE NETWORK FOR EXPRESSION

Twelve out of twenty-one women who maintain a Twitter account believe that Twitter is a more open, diverse and accepting space compared to Facebook. One defining factor is that their family members are not on Twitter. Most of the women who were interviewed do not use Twitter as a platform to connect with their friends and family. It is simply not what Twitter was designed for. On Twitter, people are able to connect with others based on the content of their tweet. Maimuna prefers Twitter because unlike Facebook, you do not have to commit to “adding” a friend before you can interact with them on an issue.

Amy thinks the best thing about Twitter, other than the fact that her parents are not on the platform, is the ability to interact with a wider range of people – including those who are not among her followers. Despite the violence that happened to her, she remains positive about being on social media, *“I know like there are more good people than the bad ones so... That experience was bad, but there’s a lot of other things that I got from Twitter”*.

The visible queer narratives on Suzie’s Twitter account has allowed her to connect with like-minded people. When she talked about her experience of being bullied in secondary school for being a non-conforming woman, she received a lot of support through direct messages and replies to her tweet. Twitter remains an important space where Suzie is better able to express her identity and opinions. *“I found people are much more aligned with my ideas on Twitter. I still have friends on Facebook but they’re also not active on Facebook anymore. So*

*everybody I know seems to have moved to Twitter”*, said Suzie. Nadia, who is a postgraduate student in her mid-twenties, expresses herself as a lesbian by having a rainbow emoji on her anonymous Twitter profile. She is not out to her Malay Muslim family members but feels safe to do so on Twitter. *“Everybody that follows me and those that I follow are on the same page, I don’t have to worry about people perceiving me wrongly”*, said Nadia.

Treena feels more comfortable expressing herself on Twitter and in her words, *“I often very easily overshare, also because I don’t think half of my following on Twitter actually know me in real life. So, I think that’s why I feel more comfortable because I don’t have to meet these people and I don’t have to justify my beliefs them”*. Treena also cautions that the violence and the narratives used by aggressors on both Facebook and Twitter are the same i.e. victim blaming when it comes to sexual harassment cases. The only difference is that the aggressors on Facebook are known to her personally, like friends or family, making it harder for her to push back without further antagonising her relationships with them.

On Twitter, Amy, Suzie, Nadia and Treena felt comfortable to share a part of themselves that are deemed controversial or forbidden by their family and society even when their account is public. They are also better able to network and connect with strangers who share the same goals, attitudes and values as them. It is through our tweets and narratives that our identities are expressed and communicated. Twitter requires less of their users’ identity information in the profile page and the network is built on a loosely connected community who share the same interests and values with many of them being strangers. On Facebook, the community is an accumulation of family members, friends and acquaintances from our physical lives who may or may not share the same interests and values as us. On Twitter, the women are better able to freely express themselves without having to meet social expectations that can now be more easily “enforced” through social surveillance. It is a place where your tweets can be shared openly and publicly to a wider and less intrusive network of intimate publics, which ironically, is the

same reason why racism, sexism, homophobia and hate disseminate so quickly. The barrier experienced by these women in accessing their freedom of expression are not merely due to the “setting” on these platforms but it has everything to do with our right to privacy too. Privacy allows women to participate in public discourse and to express different parts of themselves without fear of judgment, repercussion and violence. When their identities and expressions are mediated through these platforms, they are subjected to the design and features of these platforms that often do not allow for much autonomy and control over their privacy. As seen in the stories above, the level of privacy and control accorded to these women on these platforms play a fundamental role on their ability to express themselves freely.

## NUANCES OF CONVERSATION

Despite the disparaging remarks made about Facebook, four of the women still preferred Facebook as the social media platform for self-expression .

Hanna first spoke about polygamous marriage in Islam on her Facebook page in 2017. Hanna has been following Sisters in Islam<sup>108</sup> for a while on Facebook and she found herself aligning to their values and advocacy for women’s rights in Islam. Hanna said, *“Even though [Sisters in Islam] speaks the truth, but because of their image, they don’t wear [the] tudung, you would notice that the people don’t care”*. She believes that people will first look at whether the person has the precondition to speak about Islam before considering the content expressed. In her sharing, Hanna felt that she has the precondition as a married woman with children and who wears the tudung. She received a barrage of harassment to her criticism on polygamous marriages, including from the a state (Perak) mufti (Islamic jurist), lecturers and known Islamic preachers. Hanna faced some resistance from the men in her family as well. *“At first, of course, I got friendly advice from my husband and my father. But after some time I think they realized*

*that I won’t listen to them”*, said Hanna.

When asked if Hanna has a Twitter account, she said, *“I don’t like Twitter because it is limited in [the number of] characters. I prefer Facebook because I can write and I enjoy writing, not to gain followers”*. Similar to Jabala, she prefers Facebook over Twitter because she can write a lot more. While technically the threads function would allow her to write more, but it is still troublesome to her. She also finds Twitter too fast and the replying feature on Twitter chaotic – *“if I tweet something and someone replies me as part of a thread, I can get lost and confused as to which [part of the thread] he’s replying to”*.

Unlike Twitter, Facebook allows for more nuanced conversations where the women are better able to explain and elaborate on their ideas or opinions. Nuances in expression can get lost due to the character limit on Twitter and the conversation can easily and quickly become reactionary, which then benefits those who enjoy misleading others by using disinformation and misinformation. Zara feels that conversations on Twitter are more *snarky* and *bitchy* compared to the other platforms. Contents on Twitter dissipate quicker because of the wider network whereas on Facebook, materials are contained and guarded within the page. In this sense, intervention and disruption of a mob attack or other forms of online gender-based violence is more challenging on Facebook because it happens within a closed group of community, and violence is better sustained and contained within the group and others who are like-minded. Understanding the different types of technological features and our engagement on social media is key as it points to the gap in platform literacy needed in developing alternative and counter narratives and tactics.

## CONCLUSION

Although there are some patterns of commonality in all the experiences shared by the women who were interviewed, the women’s use of social media is still diverse, distinctive and fluid – a natural outcome

<sup>108</sup> A known women’s rights group in Malaysia advocating for rights of Muslim Women in Malaysia.

given that all women in this research come from different backgrounds. The women's performance and expression of self are based on decisions that are never frivolous and casual. Rather, these decisions are driven by their embodied identities, social locations and structural inequalities and technological architectures and political visions of these social media platforms.

The mediated nature of our self-expression over social media has arguably accorded the women some level of autonomy over the construction of their identities online. This in turn allows the women to navigate and negotiate their social precarity amidst a patriarchal setting.

The first step to truly democratise these social media platforms so that they better enable autonomy over self-expression and equal access to freedom of expression for all, is in acknowledging the inadequacy and the gaps in our knowledge when it comes to the realities of those who are marginalised, unheard and unseen in this globalised phenomena of collapsed social contexts. It is important to realise that the feminist and human rights movement towards a more ethical digital society is continual and ever-fluid process, instead of a one-for-all solution.

# 4

## **PART 2: EXPRESSION AND VIOLENCE**

# EXPRESSION AND VIOLENCE

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On May 2020, Thivyaanayagi Rajendran, a 20-year-old woman of Indian ethnicity committed suicide after a series of malicious attacks and insults were railed against her on a Facebook page—all done in response to her Tik Tok video. The video featured Thivya and her Nepali co-worker acting out a scene from a Hindi song, where both of them appeared to be sitting behind the cashier counter at a convenient store they both worked at. The video was reshared on one anonymised Facebook page with a caption stating (in Tamil), “How did this girl fall in love with a Bangla<sup>109</sup>... everyone would surely bless you”. The post invited thousands of derogatory remarks attacking her for being “an easy character” because of her association with a migrant worker. All this happened during the Covid-19 public health crisis where xenophobic sentiments against migrant workers and refugees intensified in Malaysia. People not known to her started to recognise her in public. Thivya had reached out to the administrator of the Facebook page to request for the removal of her video but it was ignored. On the same day she took her life, Thivya also lodged a police report, hoping that the Facebook page can be taken down but to no avail. She left a suicide note in which she apologised for being part of the video that brought shame to her family.<sup>110</sup>

The incident is yet another awakening to Malaysians that social media is a space where hate and violence brew with very real consequences. Yet, many have

failed to understand the context, layers and root causes of what happened to Thivya. Politicians and three media had reported the incident as mere online bullying or cyberbullying.<sup>111</sup> The term “cyberbullying” implies that this is a mere online phenomenon – an act of “bully” that took place virtually and that everyone experience violence the same way. The aggression against Thivya was rooted in her status as a young Indian woman and the widespread prejudice against migrant workers. The derogatory remarks of her being “easy” stem from the patriarchal subjugation of the woman’s status as “property” of her ethnic community, and intimate interactions with outsiders are used to questions her chastity, purity and modesty. The lack of or delay in action by the authorities and social media platform shows how little attention is given to the gender discrimination and inequality that allows for the perpetration of online violence to be done with impunity. While the perpetrator who shared Thivya’s video on Facebook is the obvious culprit in this tragedy and is now the key suspect in the police investigation, the violence experienced by Thivya is rooted in the widespread legitimisation of gender-based violence that forms part of our cultural beliefs and practices which had an inevitable impact on her access to justice. The perpetrator’s abusive act was emboldened by the online community who participated aggregately in the perpetration of gender-based violence. Only certain social categories are systematically recognized as being

109 A derogatory term to refer to migrant workers

110 Nambiar, P. (21 May 2020). Tragic end to woman bullied online for ‘dating’ foreigner. *Free Malaysia Today*. [www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/05/21/tragic-ends-to-woman-bullied-online-for-dating-foreigner/](http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/05/21/tragic-ends-to-woman-bullied-online-for-dating-foreigner/)

111 Says - [says.com/my/news/20-year-old-woman-dies-by-suicide-after-allegedly-being-cyberbullied-over-her-tiktok-video](https://says.com/my/news/20-year-old-woman-dies-by-suicide-after-allegedly-being-cyberbullied-over-her-tiktok-video); Free Malaysia Online - [www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/05/21/tragic-ends-to-woman-bullied-online-for-dating-foreigner/](http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/05/21/tragic-ends-to-woman-bullied-online-for-dating-foreigner/); New Straits Times - [www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/594223/cyberbullying-victim-found-dead-after-viral-tik-tok-video](http://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/594223/cyberbullying-victim-found-dead-after-viral-tik-tok-video)

actual targets of harm by the law enforcers in Malaysia: race, royalty and religion, and to a limited extent online bullying among children and teenagers.<sup>112</sup> Even when there are definitions for gender-based violence, conceptualising online gender-based violence remains a challenge because it is intangible, decontextualised, normalised and often gets conflated with freedom of expression. The utopian version of an unregulated and uncensored freedom of expression online rests on “a refusal to account for unequal power among individual users: systemic discrimination and abuse have serious negative impacts on the agency and participation of people who experience them”.<sup>113</sup>

The stories from the women in this research show that violence comes in many forms, at different intensity, and it is always contextual against the women’s intersectional identities and vulnerabilities. The forms of violence include normalised abusive acts that are harmful in aggregate but do not meet the legal threshold of an offence or criminal behaviour. It has been recognised that criminal legal responses are inconsistently applied along the lines of structural inequality based on race, religion, gender, socio-economic status etc.<sup>114</sup> The system continues to protect the aggressors who are in powerful positions and exempt them from any consequences for their abusive behaviour; while having intended and unintended harm on less privileged individuals. Yet, social media platforms are not only vehicles for vitriol and aggression, and appear to still provide important spaces for engagement where women enjoy better access to freedom of expression and in connecting with a supportive community at times of online gender-based violence.

Countering and eliminating online gender-based violence need more than just criminalising a barrage of

aggressive and abusive behaviours despite the harm they cause. It requires various actors to pay closer attention to the underlying causes of these normalised aggressions and the enabling environmental factors on social media. This part of the research aims to shed light on the messy entanglement of online gender-based violence with the intersectionality of our identities and the inherent unequal access to freedom of expression; how this entanglement of conflicts and power manifest itself within a complex system comprising global social media companies, algorithms, national governments and the people.

### VIOLENCE AS AN EVERYDAY REALITY

While all the women in this research experience violence based on their identity as women, the nature, intensity and impact of the violence differ based on the women’s various intersecting identities and social locations. Even for the women affected during the online backlash against women’s march, the experience is never homogenous. The women’s march was organised in Kuala Lumpur since 2017 in conjunction with International Women’s Day. Just as the march is becoming an annual event in Kuala Lumpur, the online backlash too had become a constant recurrence since 2017. In fact, the scale and number of people affected by the online gender-based violence post-women’s march had grown year after year.<sup>115</sup> Other than the overall trash-talking of women’s march, women were fat-shamed and called ugly; hijab donning Malay Muslim women were condemned for being at the march, supporting LGBTQ rights and bringing shame to their religion Islam; those who were visibly queer were targeted with homophobic, transphobic and extremist speech, including many death threats and comparing them to animals; attacks against men who defended the march were often premised on their masculinity and were named-called *pussy-licker*, *soy boy* etc. The next part of the research will look closer into what makes the women vulnerable to online gender-based violence and

112 Perimbanayagam, K. (17 August 2019). MCMC opens channel for offensive ‘race, religion and royalty’ content. *New Straits Times*. [www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/08/513634/mcmc-opens-channel-offensive-race-religion-and-royalty-content](http://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/08/513634/mcmc-opens-channel-offensive-race-religion-and-royalty-content)

113 Suzor, N., Dragiewicz, M., Harris, B., & Gillett, R., Burgess, J., & Geelen, T. (2018). Human Rights by Design: The Responsibilities of Social Media Platforms to Address Gender-Based Violence Online. *Policy & Internet*.

114 Ibid.

115 Documentation done by KRYSS Network

the nuances in their experiences.

### YOUNG WOMEN: EXPERIENCING AGGRESSIONS ONLINE FOR THE FIRST TIME

For some, the online incident was their first exposure to gender-based violence on a massive scale. Nina attended her first ever women's march in Kuala Lumpur in year 2017. She was only 15 years old then. She prepared a placard stating, *"I wish to be the next Prime Minister but I can't... Do you know why???"* (Speech bubble: *'Mana tudung?' [Translation: where is tudung]*). Nina described the march as a peaceful and heartfelt event participated by a small group of like-minded people. However, the social media was not very kind to Nina. Her photograph taken with her placard was posted on Twitter by another participant, who took the photograph with Nina's consent. Nina's photograph was posted on a thread that aimed to amplify and archive the march and participants' placards. She was not expecting the photograph to be shared indiscriminately and to be received with hate. Shortly after the photograph went on Twitter, it went viral and the #womensmarchmy hashtag was trending with hate and violence. She did not realise it until her friends informed her and she felt upset at the time. *"I was only 15 years old. I think the meanest comment people had said about me online was 'Oh, you're ugly'. It's little kids stuff in primary school and they use anonymous account on Ask FM or something. I've never been exposed to like, adult people, like who you would presume to be more mature, to put forth such hate comments to a girl they knew was 15 years old only"*, said Nina.

Like Nina, Mia attended her first women's march in 2019 at age 17. In sharing her experience at the women's march, she recalled, *"I think it was the most exhilarating moment I've ever had this year. Because you're surrounded by people who believe in the same things and they're all young like you"*. She brought with her a placard she created with her mother, stating *"Siapa bilang gadis Melayu tak melawan?"* (Translation: *who said Malay girls don't fight?*). This is a play on a song she used to sing all the time with her mother as a child.

The placard was special and close to her heart. Mia was very proud of her placard and decided to post a picture of her holding the placard onto her Instagram and Twitter. Other participants also took photographs of her placard.

Later Mia was informed by her friend that her photograph at the march (without her face and only showing body and the placard) was trending on Twitter. At first she brushed off some of the negative replies thinking that they were just dumb comments. However, as the intensity of the attacks grew, the aggression and violence became real to Mia. In recounting her experience, Mia said, *"I didn't know who to talk to, because stuff like this doesn't really happen often, right? It's so direct, because these people aren't hiding behind a fake account, they're real people saying real things. I kept refreshing and refreshing, and then I noticed my friends who went to the march, they were facing the same thing"*. One of the replies to her photograph said *"Kau siap. Nanti kita datang kita rogol kau gilir-gilir (Translation: You are doomed. We will take turns to rape you later)"*. Mia cried the entire night. She had seen online gender-based violence happening to her friends and other influencers. However, she never expected that it could happen to her personally. *"I've lived a very sheltered life...that was the first time people said those kinds of things to me. I usually see it towards other people. And it's like, it feels different when it's like towards you"*, said Mia.

Online gender-based violence targeting the women's march in Malaysia is an annual reoccurrence and young women who attend the march have always been targeted at a greater intensity. Some of the attack narratives target their young age, expressing shock to see young girls participating at the march instead of spending their time on other more important things. The attacks against both Nina and Mia were attempts to nullify the political participation of young women whose voices are already less heard in other public domains.



### GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION: INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITIES

Zara, who is in her early thirties, is in the arts industry and comes from a political family. She gets extremely anxious every time before she releases her art as online gender-based violence is becoming part and parcel of the response to her work. People would either attack her based on her queer identity or her affiliation with her family. She realises that she too has normalised the violence she experiences online. Zara was harassed during the women's march in Kuala Lumpur in 2018. Her photographs from her private Facebook account were taken without her consent and circulated all over conservative Facebook accounts and blogsites. She had to call her friends and inform them about the leaked photographs because they were all meant to be private. These were only photographs of Zara's everyday life and it was used to shame her for being queer and for being part of the women's march. In a recent discussion with her friend on online gender-based violence during the 2018 women's march, it completely slipped her mind that she was one of the victims and her friend had to remind her. She was perplexed by how her mind does not register the violence. *"I think I kind of brushed it off, because it had happened so many times"*, said Zara. On top of that, Zara also thinks that she is in a more privileged position than most other women and queers who are attacked online. In her words, *"I'll be fine, I don't need to go there"*.

Maimuna, who is in her late thirties and of Malay ethnicity, received harassment and vitriol when she posted her wedding photograph on Twitter. The wedding was a small event held abroad. Maimuna said that it was around the time where use of social media was on the rise and people were sharing their wedding pictures online and she wanted to give visibility to her own queer wedding. *"I'm sure there are other queer [Malaysians] people who got married overseas, but it's never ever published online"*, said Maimuna. However, she learnt the hard way that the act of sharing one's marital union is a privilege not extended to the LGBTQ communities. *"When heterosexual couples get married, they get like, 10,000 congratulations. But for us, we get less than 10*

*congratulations and 10,000 insult,"* recounted Maimuna. She has been open about her sexuality on Twitter and in calling out any homophobic behaviours and comments. Maimuna explained that the photograph did not show their faces. It only show their very simple wedding dresses, with both their hands wearing their wedding bands. For that, she was bombarded with comments for being an *unfit* Muslim and being an *embarrassment* to Islam. She finds it illogical and perplexing that a personal event could aggravate these people. At the time, she found it pointless to respond or to counter them and hence, she decided to just let the harassment subsided on its own.

The cases show the persistence of gender norms and discourse in our online engagement and how social media is complicit in reproducing the discrimination and harm towards women of various gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. Many continue to face violence targeting their material bodies, sexuality and identities.

### MALAY MUSLIM WOMEN: THE ETHNORELIGIOUS COMPLEXITY

Throughout the interviews, women who are visibly Malay Muslim received a different form of harassment and aggression and they often reflect existing gender discriminatory Islamic practices. The racial and religious attacks employed often draw on the archetype of the Malay Muslim woman as docile, discreet, someone who upholds the sanctity of Islam and who is not supposed to speak up against the Muslim Malay man and religious figures.

The differences in response by the Malay Muslim community can be observed from the use of language on social media. As a public figure and media professional, Karima has made a conscious decision to not post in the Malay language, particularly on her Twitter account. She tried a year ago to post in the Malay language, in the hope of reaching a wider audience. However, she found that her Malay language tweets attract an immense volume of harassment for which she did not

have the time to cope with. She decided it was not worth the mental fallout and so stopped making any public comments in the Malay language.

Suzie experienced one of the worst online gender-based violence when she spoke up against victim blaming on a Malay conservative blogsite. The blog featured a photograph of a woman fully clothed from her head to her toes including her eyes. The caption explained that this is what women should wear if they do not want to get raped. She replied by questioning why should women cover themselves and not for men to control themselves. The blogsite used Facebook's comment plugin, and therefore Suzie's comment appeared both on the blogsite and the blogsite's Facebook page. Many responded with insults and violence stating that she was "too ugly to be raped" and she "should die". Some screenshot or re-shared her comment on their respective Facebook page. Some invited their friends to attack Suzie by tagging them on the comment section. Her Facebook profile was doxxed and someone took her pictures, superimposed her face onto the body of Fiona from the Shrek movie. She was called *sampah* (Translation: trash), *perempuan neraka* (Translation: woman from hell). However, some of the users could not tell that she is a Malay Muslim because she used a non-Malay sounding name. These users insulted her saying that as a non-Muslim, she should shut up, and some had called her *babi* (Translation: pig). Some presumed she is a Malay by the colour of her skin in her photograph and called her a disappointing Muslim. Suzie deleted her comment eventually as it was getting out of control and she decided it was the best for her at that time.

Hanna, in her late thirties, is a lawyer and a mother. She first spoke about polygamy on her Facebook in 2017. Due to her prior activism involving the arrest of her brothers, she already had a substantial number of followers. Her post generated public attention and some had even reported her to the police and religious authorities for insulting the religion, Islam. She was surprised that her Facebook post could draw that much attention and that strangers would send her death threats over a post. She was attacked, among others, for being a bad Muslim woman. Some othered her as a Christian – "*pakai*

*tudung but there is a cross inside* (Translation: you wear a tudung but there is a cross inside", or that she is not qualified to speak about polygamy, even though as a Malay Muslim woman, the allowed practice of polygamy among Muslim men in Malaysia clearly affects her rights and welfare. The second kind of narrative would attack her identity as a mother and wife. Many Facebook users had urged Hanna's father and husband to control her or to stop her from *playing* on Facebook. Some showed *uninvited sympathy* to her husband and children implying that they are in a terrible position for having her as wife and mother.

The state Islamic religious authorities went to great extent to stop her from speaking up about discriminatory Islamic practices against Muslim women in Malaysia on her Facebook account. She was called in for questioning by the state Islamic religious authorities and by the police, and her house was raided by religious authorities several times. She remains unfettered by the persecution and continues to speak up.

In Azza Basarudin's book on Islam, state and gender in Malaysia, the author says that the Malay Muslims' identity is reinforced by various actors through the bodies of men, including applauding men who practice polygamy. This brand of masculinity is built on the gender hierarchies that dominate women, compulsory heterosexuality, exclusive religiosity, and right-wing nationalism.<sup>116</sup> Malay Muslim women are expected to be docile and submissive and the production of Malay Muslim masculinity relies on men being racially and religiously superior. Malaysia has had a long history of deploying identity politics for political leverage –most notably the 2019 women's march in Kuala Lumpur in which the visibility of LGBT persons' presence was used by aggressors to attack the then ruling government Pakatan Harapan for not protecting the interests of Islam.<sup>117</sup> The visibility of Malay Muslims exercising agency over their voices and bodies is considered a threat to the gender and social hierarchy and so, causes moral

116 Basarudin, A. (2016). Op. cit.

117 Documentation and observation by researcher

anxiety and seen as a threat to the type of political Islam being advanced in Malaysia. Situating the realities of aggressors in this case helps to identify the motivation at a macro-level which is predominantly state-induced insecurity over sense of nationhood, self and belonging.

### FAT-SHAMING

Fat is a significant identity that affect a woman's experience on social media and it is often used to devalue their expression and agency. Jabala uses her actual photograph on her Facebook profile. When she is attacked on Facebook, the others would often resort to a fat-shaming narrative. *"The insult will always be about my weight or they say you're ugly. I hardly hear them say that you're stupid or whatever, because the only thing they're so fixated on is how I look"*, said Jabala. Fat and body shaming is something that Jabala has experienced during her formative teenage years too. She was regularly ridiculed and made fun of because of the way she looks. It worsened her depression and affected her self-esteem for many years. As she grew older, she became less bothered by such frivolous comments. *"It helps that people who are close to me, like my partner, also said that these people are wrong, like you're not ugly, that kind of thing. Also, because I'm more mentally stable these days with my medication, it's much easier for me to handle"*, said Jabala.

Treena was attacked online after a video of her speaking at the 2019 women's march was circulated widely on Facebook and Twitter. She decided to speak in the Malay language because it is the more common language in Malaysia. In her speech, she spoke about gender equality, gender pay gap, rape and workplace harassment. Her organisation's social media account did not have a huge number of followers and therefore the risk of the video going viral was not something she considered when she consented to the posting of the video on Twitter along with the hashtag #womensmarchmy.

The video went viral on both Twitter and Facebook in less than a day. It was shared, downloaded and reuploaded on multiple Facebook and Twitter accounts. Treena described the comments as unforgiving with death and rape threats. Many were fixated on her body and the size of her legs, calling her a *"gajah (Translation: elephant)"* and none focused on the substance of her speech. She was terrified that people could recognise her from the video and cause her physical harm. Part of her also asked herself, *"I told myself that, yeah, this is a phase that all activists [go through], all activists need to have this. But it doesn't grant me anything, it only challenges and threatens my life"*. Body-shaming was one of the easiest and most common insults—a common narrative that cropped up with every attack online. She used to be affected by body shaming comments, but now she has learnt to accept her body as it is. *"Whenever people call me fat or ugly or whatever, and I will say yes, and your problem is? And they immediately shut up"*, said Treena.

In Nadia Rashidi's article on "Designing Out Fatness", she illustrates how fat bodies are reduced to bad health and a matter of personal habits and discipline. The hard line stance towards fat bodies resulted in cities built not only to exclusionary but eradication purposes and therefore removing fat bodies from public life.<sup>118</sup> The social exclusion and invisibility of fat bodies run parallel online and women are disproportionately affected because of society's infatuation with thin-is-beautiful rendition of modern femininity. Fat women who are loud and visible on social media risk being attacked and ridiculed. Society's prejudice and discrimination against fat bodies affect not only fat women but all women. Participants of the women's march in Malaysia are shamed as "ugly and fat women". The implication of such a categorisation is that we women are all lazy, entitled and unwanted on the social media space.

118 Rasidi, N. (2019). Designing Out Fatness. *The City Maker*. <https://thecitymaker.com.my/designing-out-fatness/>



*Translation: gathering of feminists usually comprise 10% pretty and well-mannered women, 70% fat, dressed scantily and ugly, 10% of them are forced by their partners...kahkahkah*

## DOUBLE INVISIBILITY

Nadia recounted her experience of being sexually harassed on Twitter when she was in hospital. Growing up, she experienced sexual harassment from some medical professionals during her physiotherapy sessions. She got molested during sessions and she was too petrified to react. *"It was surprising, I was just a kid you know...Initially I didn't know, but as I grew older and went to high school, I understood that it was not supposed to happen. When it happened, I will talk to my mom and ask them to change the person who attended to me",* said Nadia. Her tweet went viral when she wrote that even as a person with disability, she still became the target of sexual harassment. She received a mix of positive and negative responses. Many had ridiculed her, saying, *"It takes two to tango, but then this girl can't tango, what can she do",* some had questioned the possibility of a girl with disability being sexually harassed and that she is only fishing for attention. When asked about how she felt about the attacks online, she said, *"It does have an impact on me, emotionally. But then it is just for a short while. I think it is because of the experience I have been through, I tend to brush things off very quickly. To me, it is better to focus on my life compared to other people."*

Girls and women with disabilities are at greater risk of sexual harassment than their peers. They are also

less likely to speak up because of social isolation and dependency relationships they have with the aggressors. The lack of representation and visibility of people with disability in the public domain and the media has led to harmful social and cultural stigmatisation around disability. The body with disabilities is generalised as unable to reproduce and therefore unable to fulfil normative gender roles in society. The body of a woman with disabilities is therefore deemed as undesirable sexually, ineligible for marriage and denied any form of sexuality.<sup>119</sup> Other than the disbelieving of women's experience when it comes to sexual harassment, the attacks against Nadia were also compounded by the annihilation of her sexuality and her ability to be a functioning member of society.

## WOMEN IN MEDIA: TARGETED FOR BEING VISIBLE AND VOCAL

Compared to the other cases, women in media receive more visibility in media and on social media. Karima, a media professional, has experienced being on social media as a public figure for both lifestyle commercial clients and as a news presenter on political affairs. She has been harassed wearing both hats, but the characteristic and essence of the attacks are different. The objectification was far higher when she worked as a model or spokesperson for brands or as an actress. As a news presenter, she observed, while the sexual based harassment has reduced, the hatred and vitriol had increased. *"I feel it is because of the perception as well as the reality that you do have some power being a woman with a media platform, you do have power to not only explain the narrative, but also to call out discrimination and inequity which is what makes you dangerous",* said Karima. She also received messages or comments from male strangers attempting to discredit her opinions on Instagram and Twitter. A few days before the interview, Karima posted her commentary on

119 Heijden, I. & Dunkle, K. (2017). What works Evidence Review: Preventing violence against women and girls with disabilities in lower- and middle-income countries. [static1.squarespace.com/static/5656cae6e4b00f188f3228ee/t/59e44d774c0dbf18791a426e/1508134270090/Disability+Evidence+Brief\\_new.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5656cae6e4b00f188f3228ee/t/59e44d774c0dbf18791a426e/1508134270090/Disability+Evidence+Brief_new.pdf)

Instagram on the gender pay gap and global inequity, supported by statistics from a recent survey by the World Bank. She faced attacks from several strangers, predominantly men, who claimed that *“things can’t be that bad”* and *“you are making things up”*. She usually does not engage them directly, but puts together a quick story post on Instagram that points them towards the research or survey.

Our world has long celebrated masculinity as the benchmark for dominance, leadership and decision-making in the public domain. Women who are outspoken and vocal are deemed a threat to that social order and therefore need to be shut down with hate and insults.<sup>120</sup> The attacks against women who are visibly participating in the political discourse is nothing but a tactic to eradicate their participation in the public domain.

## DEFINING EXPRESSION AND VIOLENCE

Katherine, a Malay Muslim woman in her mid-twenties, encountered an experience where a seemingly neutral message had led to a traumatising experience for her. A year ago, a female Member of Parliament (MP) was criticised by a man on a live talk show for her dressing style, adding that the upper part of her blouse was “exposed” when her headscarf was swept aside, and so he could see the outline of her bra.<sup>121</sup> One of the known religious figures, WZ<sup>122</sup> tweeted how the man should not have criticised the MP on a public platform but to do so in private. Katherine rebutted and called out his hypocrisy as WZ had on other occasions publicly conducted moral policing on actresses and celebrities who made the decision to stop donning the hijab. She tweeted, *“You do the same thing you know, probably you know the reason why men have been doing this is*

*because they see figures like you doing it publicly, so probably just get off that high pedestal.”*

WZ denied Katherine’s allegation and claimed that she had misunderstood him. Even though his tweet did not outrightly incite violence, his big number of followers started bombarding Katherine on Twitter with bile remarks and insults. Some assumed that Katherine was still in secondary school and asked her to be humble and respect WZ’s wisdom. Some called her a slut, a whore; a few had asked her to suck their dicks and would make vile and even criminal suggestions, *“Someone should rape this girl, she talks too much”*, and *“Maybe she wants to taste the dick and she will shut up”*. A few of Katherine’s friends who actually knew WZ in person alerted him that his followers were perpetrating harm and violence against Katherine and asked him to tell his followers to stop that. Instead, WZ sub-tweeted<sup>123</sup> Katherine without mentioning her name or Twitter handle in which he said, *“Oh, this is what happens when people no longer want to listen to religious figures”*.

Katherine opines that WZ, despite the perceived neutrality of his tweets, should be considered an aggressor of online gender-based violence, though she knows that legally it is a tall standard to prove. However, she added, *“I think probably we can use the Good Samaritan principle. If we see someone being beaten, you try your best to help that person or you probably try your best to ask for help so that person doesn’t get beaten up any further. But if this person doesn’t do anything at all to diffuse, in a way, he is an accomplice”*.

Katherine’s story alludes to a broader and stickier conversation on the power of language and discourse—one that does not always fall under the legal definition of hate speech and gender-based violence. Much like the structure of social media, our language and discourse are not neutral but they engage with various structures and institutions of power to regulate our behaviours and expressions. Language and discourse

120 Criado-Perez, C. (2016). ‘Women that talk too much need to get raped’: What men are really saying when they abuse women online. *Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)*. [www.osce.org/files/f/1/documents/c/3/220411.pdf](http://www.osce.org/files/f/1/documents/c/3/220411.pdf)

121 Khor, S. (25 May 2018). Netizens are livid after a caller said he can see Nurul Izzah’s underwear on a live show. *Says. says.com/my/news/nurul-izzah-stunned-to-silence-as-male-caller-says-he-can-see-her-underwear-on-live-show?\_ga=2.244643073.587716010.1625830808-532959147.1625830808*

122 Aggressor’s name is anonymized to protect the identity of the victim.

123 a tweet that refers to a particular user without directly mentioning them, typically as a form of furtive mockery or criticism.



produce and reproduce meanings, norms, stereotypes, otherness and discrimination. WZ's social status as a religious figure and high numbers of followers gave him power over Katherine in this instance. He was able to steer his followers into supporting his position as a superior religious figure over a young Muslim woman. His tweet intended to inflame the emotions of followers, to denigrate Katherine's comments with the ultimate goal to silence and harm her.

The power that can be wielded and manipulated through language and discourse is also evidenced in an interview with one of the aggressors. Latifah is a Malay Muslim young woman in her mid-twenties, and at the time of the interview, was working in the communication industry. During the 2019 women's march organised in Kuala Lumpur, Latifah who had approximately 5,000 followers on her Twitter account tweeted about the presence of LGBTQ at the march. She describes herself as an advocate for the causes of the women's march but believes that being LGBTQ is against her religion. She thinks that the presence of pride flags, queer presenting participants and LGBTQ rights placards at the march signaled a hijack of the march and its agenda. In her tweet, she merely stated, *"Rainbow flags can be seen at #womensmarchmy Jalan TAR. So I guess this is where Malaysia is heading now? I am not gonna comment much, but the floor is yours. Feel free to ::smiley emoji::"*, followed by photographs she obtained without consent from other Twitter accounts, where most, if not all, were participants at the march. When asked why she decided to tweet a question instead of expressing her disapproval, she said:

*"Because that's how Twitter works. I studied media, like social media all those things I studied them really well. So I know how the audience works, I know what will get the people to talk. So by posting such thing, it will sort of give the readers their own assumption of it. Whether it's negative or positive, to get the topic going you just throw a question and people will automatically assume. It sort of achieved what I was trying to do. And I also don't want people to accuse me of anything. So my tweet is actually pretty safe, because I didn't say anything I asked people to think about it."*

Her tweet was retweeted and shared by thousands of users and filled with abusive and violent comments against LGBTQ people, death threats and hate speech included. Latifah said that while she disagreed with being LGBTQ, she does not condone violence against them and had spoken against her followers who perpetuate violence. The absence of violent language is therefore justifiable to Latifah as a legitimate expression of her views and political stance.

Legally, the absence of direct violent and abusive language from WZ and Latifah are unlikely to fulfil the criteria of cases of hate speech or online gender-based violence. They did not invoke or call for violence and harm against the women and LGBTQ persons, and in Latifah's case, she even appeared to be against the violence done to them. They were, however, in positions of power and influence to get people to negatively react to the issue the way they had intended. The ability of WZ and Latifah to shift the narrative to their favour or their intended purpose means that the narratives of those they are not agreeable with, risk being trivialised, dismissed and ignored. Many women in the interview had expressed a sense of annihilation of their own narratives when they experience a mob attack to the extent that they do not even know how to defend their position, which could simply be an expression of their lived realities or views, and freedom of expression. Suzie expressed her frustration when attempting to disrupt and counter the attacks against the women's march in 2019. *"I was so tired of explaining myself, it is the same script over and over again. Even when it is the most logical thing, backed with evidence, people still argue [against] it, it made me feel super helpless"*. Our power and ability to control our narrative is closely intertwined with the interplay of powers that take place in determining what identities, bodies, discourse, actions, behaviours and relationships are acceptable.<sup>124</sup>

WZ and Latifah's expressions have to be contextualised against the rise of ethno-nationalist religious ideology

<sup>124</sup> Kee, Jac sm, (2020, in collaboration with Jaafar J.). Think piece: Narrating and challenging gender norms on social media in Asia. For access: write@jacsmk.space

that places Malay Muslim as the supreme and native category of citizen within the nation. The Malay Muslim supremacist ideology has been mobilised by politicians through populist political discourse, and social media has proven to be an effective vehicle for this mobilisation. Gender and sexuality becomes a galvanising site for making a point about the supremacy and hierarchy of the Malay Muslim identity.<sup>125</sup> For Katherine, WZ's tweet was made within a context that punishes women who defy male Muslim authority in Islam as it is often in these contexts that it is interpreted that women are the inferior sex. In Latifah's case, her tweet reinforced the discriminatory worldview against LGBTQ persons and the limiting binary understanding of gender. Anything against the binary thinking is deemed unnatural, inhumane and a threat to the Malay Muslim identity. In one seemingly innocent tweet, Latifah effectively denied the recognition of LGBTQ individuals as human and on equal footing with other human beings who are entitled to human rights and dignity. These types of expressions are possibly some of the most dangerous as they encourage the infliction of psychological harms on the targets, justify the violence, and can reverse any advancements in the promotion and defence of gender equality and human rights.

### AGGREGATE HARM BY NUMBERS

Amy, who is in her early thirties, was mobbed online two years ago and that experience has shaped how she views online gender-based violence. A K-pop artist had committed suicide and fans in Malaysia decided to host a gathering to mourn for the late K-pop artist. The event was, however, sensationalised by media and there was a disproportionate focus on young Malay Muslim women with *hijab* at the candlelight vigil. Many were ridiculing and insulting these young women, including the mufti (Islamic jurist) of Perak. Some were criticising the holding of candles as a non-Islamic ritual and should not be done by Muslims. Amy decided to take it to Twitter and to call out the mufti's bullying behaviour.

In her thread, she said that the artist had a positive influence on his fans and people should just leave them be to mourn for him. She had a small following on Twitter and was not expecting her tweet to go viral, but it did. Her tweet blew up and she got up to 100 direct messages; 50,000 views on the tweet, not counting the number of replies, retweets and sharing of screenshots of her tweet. Many were attacking her for challenging the mufti's authority – *"Tengok la ape Melayu Muslim ini lagi, apa, pentingkan K-pop daripada mufti ni pun (Translation: What kind of Malay Muslim is this, who prioritise K-pop over mufti)"*, *"Tu mufti, mufti pun nak lawan, sayang sangat K-pop tu ape, taksuk K-pop (Translation: How dare you challenge the mufti, you love K-pop that much, K-pop fanatic)"*, and because she was visibly wearing a *hijab* in her profile picture, some had asked her to *"tanggalkan la hijab! (Translation: take off your hijab)"*. The incident was also reported by several Malay language tabloid blogsites and news media, further amplifying the harm to a larger audience.

During the attacks, any incoming messages and notifications added to her mental distress, regardless of the contents. *"You may think it is just one tweet or a simple forwarding or resharing, but the one at the receiving [end] would see a lot more"*, said Amy. Every single click or tweet increased her visibility and there was a real fear that the visibility of her tweet would lead to investigation under Syariah criminal offences. She also feared that people might recognise her in public, which may then lead to physical assault as she lives in a Malay Muslim majority area.

Social media is all about self-publishing, content sharing, and users networking. The networked nature of the platforms has not only made it easier for the aggressors to find the victim, but the infrastructure also makes it easier for aggressors to find one another. They build on each other's narrative in abusing and harassing the victim. The victim faces increased risk with every single signal boost from a new user of the mob attack—sometime this includes unknowing and curious bystanders and business accounts hopping on a trending topic or hashtag to promote their product/services. At the height of the online mob attack against

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.



the 2019 women's march in Kuala Lumpur, the hashtag #womensmarchmy was also populated by curious bystanders and business opportunists on Twitter. Even they have no intention to cause harm, but the algorithm is unable to discern the quality of every interaction and works towards amplifying whatever content that has the most interaction.

Even though Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have policies against hate speech and gender-based violence, the dominant design of the algorithm to maximise the distribution of trending contents, which usually include inflammatory abusive content "can create economic disincentives to deal with abuse".<sup>126</sup> Ironically, the same infrastructure and tools are also what allow activists and feminists to mobilise and organise important movements; and to build a collective network of individuals who engage in the unseen labour of challenging the normative discourse which almost always preserves the status quo. The same tools, but used with very different power dynamics. Online gender-based violence is not new and it is rooted in structural and gender inequalities in society. Platforms and algorithms that do not actively and consciously address the potentiality of these tools to be abused against vulnerable groups will not achieve the promise of an egalitarian space but inevitably contribute to the aggravation of inequalities and discrimination.

## DISRUPTING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE

Hanna has 57 thousand followers on her Facebook and she knows that she can use this platform to speak up against discriminatory practices towards women in Islam. As a collateral result to her visibility, she frequently receives death threats and harassment online and some have resulted in investigation by the police and religious authorities for *insulting* the religion, Islam.<sup>127</sup>

She describes herself as *being at a different level* having survived the violence and hate. Hanna wishes she is in a position of power to change laws and policy, "I'm just [a] layman, a woman. Sometimes, I think whether what I say will make a significant change".

Like Hanna, all the other women interviewed have remained on social media regardless of the violence, misogyny, racism and homo- and trans-phobia. During the workshop, the researcher raised this and asked why women go back to these social media platforms despite experiencing online gender-based violence. One participant answered, "It is like asking after you have been robbed on the street, why do you go back to the street instead of just staying at your home for your protection?" The explosion of self-publishing contents on social media means that women are better able to express themselves and to bring forth narratives and expression that are not within the normative discourse and that remain on the fringes of society.

The decentralised nature of social media networks has allowed us to widen our network and expand the reach of our voices too. As a postgraduate student, Nadia believes Twitter is the easiest and quickest way to amplify the voices of people with disabilities. "In real life, when you are talking about disability in general, you have to have a crowd to actually listen. For me as a student, I don't really have such platforms in real life to do that", said Nadia. Whereas on Twitter, she can access a wider audience in promoting her narratives on people with disabilities. At the time of the interview, Nadia had about 400 followers on her account. There was a point when Nadia felt like giving up when the first story she shared about her life as a person with disability did not get much attention, the way she thought it would. She felt discouraged that no one was paying attention to stories on disability. However, when she replied to someone else's tweet on sexual harassment, it had 300 retweets and was read by 5,000 people in the span of a few days. Half of the responses were positive while the other half were in the form of harassment and aggression. In the interview, Nadia wondered why her threads on disability did not garner a similar amount of attention.

<sup>126</sup> Suzor, N., Dragiewicz, M., Harris, B., & Gillett, R., Burgess, J., & Geelen, T. (2018). Op. cit.

<sup>127</sup> While it is questionable if a religion can be insulted, it is the norm in Malaysia for extremist and conservative Muslims, including Muslim leaders and Islamic religious authorities, to cite "insults to Islam" for comments that they find personally offensive.

Nadia's experience illustrates how narratives flow on Twitter and engage with different sites of powers and actors. Nadia's tweet on her sexual harassment experience was a quote tweet of another tweet with high numbers of tractions. In addition, it was made at a time where discourse around sexual harassment and rape culture were amplified and highly visible following the #metoo movement. It built on years and years of work by feminists and activists, on ground and online, to create a shift in discourse around consent, rape, sexual violence and bodily autonomy. Whereas her narrative on her intersectionality as a woman with disability was not a "trending" topic on Twitter. It speaks to the invisibility of marginalized voices and how it is made further invisible by the algorithm that works to capture and amplify trending topics— topics that everyone is talking about and that often exclude marginalized voices. It reflects the unequal access to freedom of expression within a socio-techno public domain—being able to say something does not mean that they will be heard for what it is. Nadia reflected on this and said, *"I feel like regardless of whether people pay attention to me or not, it is still gonna be there. Someday some people will read it, even if it is just one person, it is good enough. It may spread around later"*.

Bonnie, in her mid-twenties, works in a talent management company and is also a sex positive advocate herself. Through Instagram and public events, she tries to shift public perception on sex as a positive experience rather than it being a stigma or through a porn-centric lens. Bonnie used to manage a YouTube account where she published comedy videos that focused on the everyday life, practice and culture of Sabahans<sup>128</sup>. She has since ceased doing that because of time constraints and a change in her career trajectory. From managing a YouTube channel to pushing content on Instagram, Bonnie has come to appreciate that she is also creating an online community at the same time. *"A lot of people will respond to you better. I guess that's why a lot of people share things online because, you*

*know, they will reach a bigger crowd and more people will feel like they are connected to you. I guess in that sense then, your free speech is encouraged, celebrated"*, said Bonnie.

Social media has reconfigured the ecosystem of information and knowledge production radically. Individuals like Nadia and Bonnie are given the tools and resources to participate directly in building, diversifying and disrupting normative discourse through self-publishing, aggregation and expansive network sharing.<sup>129</sup> However, the way information, narratives and expressions interact are complex and subjected to a range of factors including its actors, algorithm, existing societal values and its proximity to the dominant and normative discourse. The same tools used by Nadia and Bonnie are also used to proliferate hate speech, anti-feminism, anti-liberalism, and anti-women's rights discourse. Understanding how expressions and narratives interact on social media provides key insights to our ongoing strategy in pushing forward counter- and alternative narratives around gender and sexuality.

## ORGANISED AND INTENTIONAL AGGRESSION

Online gender-based violence and the abusive treatment against women are far more than just trolls or merely a matter of lack of online etiquette. In my conversation with the two aggressors, Haleem and Kazim, it became apparent that online gender-based violence is organised by a community that share their mutual dedication in defending a conservative male Malay Muslim supremacist ideology. Feminism, gender equality and women's bodily autonomy are seen as threats that need to be eliminated for the protection of their world order.

Haleem, a Malay Muslim man in his early twenties, is politically and socially motivated to defend and protect the "conservative ideology" on Twitter. He opened an

<sup>128</sup> Sabahans are people from Sabah, the second biggest state in Malaysia and is located on east Malaysia

<sup>129</sup> Kee, Jac sm, (2020, in collaboration with Jaafar J.). Think piece: Narrating and challenging gender norms on social media in Asia. For access: write@jacsmk.space

account on Twitter when he was in secondary school with the intention to follow political news. *“But in 2016, I discovered the ‘conservative vs liberal’ part of the twitter community. And since then, I am still in the conservative side, and still using Twitter to make sure I do not miss any important issue and discussions”,* replied Haleem when asked about his motivation in using Twitter through a text-based interview. Learning about the conservative ideology has been life-changing for him. To Haleem, people with liberal views are urban Malaysians who are alienated from the lived realities of poor or oppressed minorities in rural areas. For him, the conservative framework provides a logical framework that would safeguard the rights of the poorer populations in Malaysia.

The next part of Haleem’s experience has to be understood against a known conservative and anti-human rights figurehead on Twitter, known by the anonymous name, Kozilekk.<sup>130</sup> He has about 100,000 followers and is infamous for trolling, harassing and instigating mobs against other Twitter users, particularly women and LGBTQ persons, for speaking about feminism or calling out bigoted comments. Common issues raised by him, among others were feminism as a threat to society, oppression faced by men, threats against masculinity and gender roles in modern society, justification for conservative gender roles, and justification for marital rape and sexual abuses. Those targeted by Kozilekk can expect to receive waves of harassment and violence by his followers. Kozilekk’s account was finally suspended by Twitter three years ago.

Haleem had been an avid supporter of Kozilekk’s views and believes that following the suspension of his account the *conservative/anti-liberals are “weaker”*. He opines that Kozilekk is unequivocal in initiating conversations with the liberals whereas the other Malay Muslim conservatives are not as outspoken as Kozilekk. He said, *“I decided to step in and fight those liberals to make sure our voices are always on the Twitterjaya and [the] youth’s mind would not be polluted with such*

*blasphemy”*.

Haleem has a clear motivation and objective on Twitter—to defend and promote the discourse for conservatives, in which he briefly described as *Malay rights, normalisation of being LGBT persons, sins being publicised and normalised by Muslims*. *“That’s what make me think I am not a keyboard warrior. Because in real life, I also hold onto my stances in twitter”,* said Haleem.

Kazim, also a Malay Muslim man in his early twenties, is currently studying in a university located in East Malaysia. Kazim’s family is on the conservative spectrum and had sent all the children to *pondok sekolah*<sup>131</sup> since young. Even though he has been in the debate team at school and was trained to appreciate differences in opinions, his thinking during his formative years were mostly skewed towards the spectrum of conservatism.

It was also around the same time he started using Twitter and his expression reflected his conservative beliefs. Little did he expect his mere expression on Twitter would lead to the formation of a conservative echo chamber and reinforced his confirmation bias. His relationship with Kozilekk started when Kozilekk followed him and Kazim in return followed Kozilekk. Kazim admitted that he was influenced by Kozilekk’s regressive opinion on men’s rights, feminism and gender equality. Soon after, a mutual follower of Kozilekk added him into an anti-feminist Twitter group chat, now defunct following the suspension of Kozilekk’s account. The group is private with about 20 users. Kozilekk would prompt the group on tweets that were feminist-sounding and mobilise others to troll them. Kazim thought it was entertaining to troll and to sealion any tweets that *“sounds scientifically unreasonable or maybe things that can be engaged with facts”*. He had deployed name-calling and use of derogatory labels in trolling others, to which he admitted that he would not do in face-to-face interactions. However, Kazim drew the line at incitement of violence. Even though he did not agree with his mutual friends

130 <https://twitter.com/kozilekk>

131 Religious-based boarding school for Muslims

who incited violence, he mostly just kept his silence because he did not think they would listen to him.

The group had marked around five to six feminist identifying Twitter users and they were heavily targeted by the group. Kazim remembered trolling and doxxing an anonymous male-presenting Twitter account that shared feminist discourse. The group did some social engineering and found out that the account was actually managed by a woman. They disseminated her photographs all over Twitter. Eventually, the anonymous Twitter account was deactivated.

When Kozilekk was permanently banned from Twitter, Kazim felt bumped because no one else was initiating conservative and provocative discourse. He hoped Kozilekk would return to Twitter under a new account or find a way to reactivate his account. Nonetheless, he did not expect the absence of an anti-human rights and anti-feminist thought leader would transform his worldview. *“I didn’t expect my way of thinking to change, but it did. So now I feel like he’s (Kozilekk) an asshole, compared to before”*. Kazim thinks the shift in his thinking is also attributed to a prolonged engagement with feminists and LGBTQ individuals over the years (including those years when Kozilekk was still around). The absence of Kozilekk had somehow punctured the filter bubbles and allowed for better reception of differing views. When asked if his past engagement with feminists and LGBTQ had helped in forming his current views, he said:

“I think a little bit. I think that there’s a little bit [of that], but when Kozilekk was gone, so did my extremist view, and that [allowed for] the opposing views to come in. Actually, during Kozilekk time, I was already friends with a few gay people, and when he was gone, I made more new friends. So that’s how I transitioned, mostly because I met new people, and I got to know them.”

Kazim regretted for being so involved in the attacks against feminists and he is blocked by many as a result of his interactions online. On reflection, he did not think the group had any objective other than to mob and bully. *“I don’t think the group has any objective. They’re just making other people’s lives harder. I think that’s the*

*main objective. Kozilekk’s view, if I’m seeing from this, from my standpoint right now, I think it’s... it’s extremist and misogynistic”*.

Kazim and Haleem’s experience ought to be compared. Both were influenced by Kozilekk—an acknowledged thought leader who seems to wield immense power over the conservative and anti-feminist discourse on Twitter and has a direct impact on his followers’ opinions and actions. Yet, the absence of Kozilekk yield different life experiences for both Kazim and Haleem. The misogynistic and conservative mindset unleashed by Kozilekk remains with Haleem and he is determined to sustain the movement. For Kazim, his resistance to LGBTQ persons’ rights and feminism dissipated with the disappearance of a misogynist thought leader. He is free to explore alternative discourses and learn about different lived experiences which led to a change in his mindset.

It has to be acknowledged too that there is a gap in existing data in identifying the extent of the anti-feminist network or networks, and the strategies employed. Even then, the stories revealed that online misogyny and gender-based violence is coordinated and self-organised—much like how feminists and gender equality activists are organised among ourselves in reclaiming our space. The hate directed at women is intended and deliberate. It is not simply a matter of frustrated men venting online using an anonymous account. It involves a concerted and sustained movement to ban women’s expression from social media.

## CONCLUSION

Social media has amplified women’s voices to a certain extent yet it remains an uphill battle when narratives on feminism and women’s sexuality, bodily autonomy and political participation are received with violence. Identifying “triggering factors” of online gender-based violence is almost impossible as women do not have to be vocal or visible to be the target of online gender-based violence. The very act of being yourself and living your everyday life i.e. having a fat body, being a

woman from a political family, or sharing pictures of your wedding, could lead to targeted and deliberate aggressions.

A large part of women's vulnerabilities and social precarity emanates from the invisibility and disbelief of women's experiences and voices, especially women from marginalised communities. The interviews in this research suggest an increased polarisation of beliefs and resistance towards gender equality. Violence intersects with existing discriminations and social inequalities, and produces different impacts and social relations between the victims and the aggressors. They are not isolated incidents that happened but a continuum of violence that continues to haunt our progress towards gender equality in public spaces and in the domestic sphere. Violence is also organised with the end goal of silencing women and defending an ethno-religious supremacist status quo framed through a patriarchal lens. Aggressors are ready to reject evidence and facts that run contrary to their beliefs and prefer their declaration of stances instead of a healthy exchange of opinions.

The algorithm and architect of social media make a difference. Social media is forming a cultural norm where discrimination, aggressions and violence are normalised, justified and amplified. While it cannot be conclusively stated, due to the small sample size, stories shared by the women and the attacks around #womensmarchmy illustrate the "capital value" of gender-based violence on social media. Users take advantage on what is trending in the hope of driving traffic to their contents. In the age of attention economy, any form of interactions and traffic i.e. comment, retweet, like, share, is a scarce commodity. This is more so when our appreciation of freedom of expression are often void of the gender lens and narratives and discourse perpetrating online gender-based violence is seen as a mere exercise of one's freedom of expression.

# 4

## **PART 3: RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE**

# RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE

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All women in the interview claimed that there is a shortage of effective remedies to online gender-based violence by law enforcement bodies and social media platforms. Only two out of twenty-three women had reached out to the police and even then, there was no action taken by the police to investigate or protect the women. The inadequate responses to online gender-based violence is a problem that runs parallel with traditional forms of gender-based violence i.e. sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, stalking and domestic violence. Similarly, there is also a tendency to blame the victims of online gender-based violence, especially in cases of non-consensual dissemination of intimate images (or commonly known as revenge porn).<sup>132</sup> Law enforcement officers are often cited to ask the women to “shut down” their social media, or to “toughen up” and take the backlash in response to their expression, or not to be overly sensitive and play the victim card.<sup>133</sup>

Given the failure of institutional support, much of the effort in responding to the violence is transferred to the individual women and at times, the collective response of feminist networks or women’s rights organisations. This chapter of the research aims to capture these strategies and to understand their effectiveness and limitations.

## LEGAL AND POLICY GAP

Only two out of twenty-three women interviewed made or attempted to make a police report on the online gender-based violence they had experienced. It never occurred to Zara that she can report any of the gender-based violence against her online. *“I guess because a lot of the attacks are queer, homophobic in nature, if I do go to the police or MCMC, then that is going to come up, and that’s not really a conversation I want to have with them”*, explained Zara. The lack of confidence and mistrust towards law enforcers is a parallel phenomenon with the other forms of gender-based violence, indicating a culture of impunity for aggressors of gender-based violence. For Zara, she is at further risk due to the State’s active persecution of LGBTQ people.

Katherine made a police report against the threats and harassment she received. The police officer on duty was not helpful at all and indicated that she might be over-reacting and that the threats were not serious. *“If it wasn’t serious, I wouldn’t be here”*, Katherine told the police officer. When she tried to follow up on the investigation with the police officer, the person would again dismiss her experience by saying *“Why? Is there someone else who is threatening you? Do you feel unsafe now?”*

Contrary to the belief that online gender-based violence is merely virtual and innocuous, victims of online gender-based violence suffer real harms physically, mentally, socially and economically. The omnipresence of digital network means that your aggressors could be anyone and anywhere. The women in this research have

<sup>132</sup> KRYSS Network has done a webinar on why the term “revenge porn” is misleading and harmful. See [kryss.network/2020/06/23/webinar-002-neither-revenge-nor-porn-unpacking-non-consensual-dissemination-of-intimate-images/](https://kryss.network/2020/06/23/webinar-002-neither-revenge-nor-porn-unpacking-non-consensual-dissemination-of-intimate-images/)

<sup>133</sup> Emma, A. J. (2014). You’re an Ugly, Whorish, Slut. *Feminist Media Studies*, 14(4), 531-546



experienced loss of sleep, fear of going out, unable to work or to study, loss of self-confidence, self-censorship, anxiety, depression, withdrawal from social media and public participation etc. The women also feel their physical securities are threatened. The week after the violence, Amy had to excuse herself from several family reunions because she feared strangers may recognise her in public place or that her uncle may have seen the attacks on WhatsApp or on one of the Facebook pages. Katherine had to move back to live with her parents in a different state for a while and Treena had to relocate because she feared her neighbours may recognise her from the viral video.

Despite the inaction by the police, the decision to make a police report had resulted in a positive outcome albeit to a limited extent. Katherine posted a photograph of the police report on Twitter, with a description “*Siapa bilang gadis Melayu tak melawan?* (Translation: who said Malay girls do not fight?)”. The threats reduced after her tweet and people stopped making direct violent comments after realising that she will not be silenced by the attack and that there could be serious consequences to their actions. This points to the debate of anonymity as a causation of online violence and hate raised in Part I of this research. The motivation for aggression is not a mere matter of aggressors taking on an anonymous identity. It is the knowledge that there will be no repercussions for their actions and that they are immune from any form of accountability for the harm they cause.

## DOCUMENTATION AND EVIDENCE

Even when the targets want to make a police report, they are sometimes hampered by the requirement of evidence in the investigation process. Five years ago, when she was 16 years old, Meena’s intimate photograph was distributed non-consensually by her then boyfriend, to which Meena was coerced into sending the photograph. The photograph went viral among her peers and even to students from other schools. It was a very difficult time in her life. She was sexually harassed, blackmailed, slut-shamed, and

name-called on Twitter and Instagram. Some of them were strangers and others were people she knew. Many had construed the photograph as an invitation to make unwanted sexual advances. They would blackmail Meena through Twitter or Instagram that if she did not perform certain sexual favours for them, they would continue to distribute her photograph—a clear violation of a minor’s bodily autonomy and dignity, and illegal as far as the law is concerned as it may be considered as sexual offences against children. Meena did not confide with any of the school teachers or her parents about what was happening to her. During the incident, she relied on a friend who assisted her in removing and erasing all the messages with the then boyfriend, as well as the messages from the harassers. She just wanted to forget everything and move on with her life.

Eventually, the incident escalated to the teachers and the school principal a year later and Meena’s mother was called to school. Meena was victim-blamed by the teachers but nobody questioned why the boy first released the photograph without her consent. Her parent tried to make a police report on all the harassment against her but the police said there is nothing that they could do as Meena had already deleted most of the evidence out of panic. With that, her case was left unremedied.

Meena’s immediate response was that she wanted to erase all traces of violation, shame and harm, and not to go to the police. This is also a reflection of an entrenched mistrust against law enforcers and the social stigma towards the female body. The requirement and expectation by law enforcers of victims to keep the evidence does not consider the mental health and reality of victims of online gender-based violence.

Amy’s experiences too reflect the same. Amy wanted to document all the evidence of harassment and violence but it was re-traumatising every time she read them. A trusted friend offered to take over her Twitter account eventually and told her to stop checking her messages. Her friend screenshot all the threats, hateful comments and harassment before deleting them. Amy thinks that support in documentation is really important. Not only

that it helped in keeping the evidence, it made her feel less lonely because someone believed her story and trauma.

From the victim's perspective, it should be understandable that victims may be unwilling or reluctant to make a police report, and given how traumatising it can be for the victims, the natural human response is to forget and erase. However, from the law enforcement perspective, non-preservation of violating contents or evidence greatly lessen the chance of establishing a probable criminal case for investigation. It is incumbent that any laws, policies or mechanisms meant to address online gender-based violence are victim-centred, and not trauma-informed or which discourage women from reporting online gender-based violence. It is clear that the existing justice system is inadequate in addressing online gender-based violence because of how women's bodily autonomy and sexuality remain stigmatised and the persistent inclination to victim blame the women. There is a need for substantial rethinking in what it means to ensure access to justice for victims and to clearly define the elements of online gender-based violence, including what reinforces the trauma for victims. It also begs the question what would justice and redress look like for victims beyond a punitive measure involving the State's power.

### REDRESS MECHANISM BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

Redress mechanisms by social media companies are also far from adequate. Despite its inadequacy, it is however considered the more accessible and accessed route for redress as a mechanism compared to local law enforcement. All the women had said that their complaints to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were often not entertained or the platforms will say the contents do not violate community guidelines and therefore they cannot remove them.

One such reason is the failure to understand the nuances of language, the cultural contexts and the unequal power dynamics when it comes to freedom of

expression. The blanket defence of an unfettered access to freedom of expression fails to account for the power held by individuals or a group of people and delegitimise claims of harm and discrimination.

Given the stark non-recognition of online gender-based violence by social media platforms, women have since relied on the power of mass reporting by mobilising people within their network to report the same violating contents at the same time. This was done during the online backlash against the women's march in 2019, particularly on Twitter and Facebook. The community managed to get some of the posts removed from Twitter and Facebook, but a majority of the violating contents were not removed. There are two main reasons why these were not removed successfully: 1) Platforms did not find that the posts violate their terms of service; and 2) Once the violating contents and the violence had spread, it is difficult, if not impossible to track and report all of them especially where it was downloaded or screenshot for resharing across different platforms including messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram which are private and hard to trace.

Zara was part of the network mobilising others to report to platforms during the women's march backlash. She was frustrated at the inaction by Facebook, *"I reported a lot of posts, not just mine, and every single one came back as 'this does not violate our community standards blah blah...,' I thought at least they take those targeting me more seriously because I was the one reporting it saying this is me, still nothing. When the report came back saying nothing, I clicked on the post again, and one of them had increased to 2000 shares"*.

Yan, who was a volunteer for the 2019 women's march, upon reflection on the violence online, notes the different between Facebook and Twitter. The design of Facebook is such that it allows a "closed" community where like-minded people can gather within the same page, group or comment areas. *"Monkey see monkey do behaviour is even more prevalent on Facebook. So, it is actually easier to build up a mob mentality on Facebook versus Twitter. And it is harder once that mob mentality is built up, it is even harder to break it through"*, explained Yan.

The same tools designed to defend freedom of expression on social media are also abused by the aggressors. Hanna's posts criticising polygamy regularly get reported as adult nudity and sexual activity, which resulted in the suspension of her account by Facebook, sometimes for a week and sometimes for a month. Hanna recounted her recent experience of being banned from Facebook for 28 days. She received a notification from Facebook that her post violated the community guidelines, specifically on the restriction around adult nudity and sexual activity. In the post, Hanna merely called out a religious authority who divorced her pregnant wife because she refused to give her consent to him for marrying a second wife. The religious authority has a huge number of followers and Hanna believed that they mobilised among themselves to report her post. *"That's why I think Facebook is funny, because if you want to control what people post in Malaysia, you need people who understand our language and culture well"*, said Hanna.

Echoing Yan's reflection, all the women in the research think that when it comes to responsiveness to violence, Instagram is one of the better ones, followed by Twitter. Facebook is the least responsive platform. Veeda thinks that the reporting mechanism on all social media platforms are not helpful, especially on Facebook. Veeda reported a Facebook account of a local music band with neo-Nazi views. Several of their posts and photographs with obvious Nazism elements were taken down. However, the one without photographs and written in the Malay language remained up on Facebook. The account was still not removed and Veeda could only choose to block the account.

### THE "BLOCK" AND "UNFRIEND" BUTTON

Disengage, block and removal are common tactics used by all the women in addressing the online gender-based violence they faced. Maimuna used to believe social media as an egalitarian space, but after the incident involving her wedding photograph, she realised that people are just terrible and they just want to harass others instead of trying to understand and listen. She

started blocking and muting trolls and aggressors on her Twitter after the incident, she said, *"To them, it is not about understanding, it is about outlive in terms of arguing. But that's not the point of our work right, it's not a marathon about who argues better"*.

There are two instances where the women would block other users. First, it was in response to the attacks and harassment by the other users. The second type of block is where the women employed pre-emptive blocks when they believe the others have sexist, racist, homophobic or other discriminatory opinions.

Veeda follows several block lists on Twitter for feminist haters, transphobia, paedophiles etc, maintained by users whom she knows she can trust. Whenever there is an update on the block list, she too will follow and block the other users. Blocking these users has contributed to her mental health. *"My timeline has never been cleaner and safer than I have ever experienced. On Twitter, the sense of community is there, people care for each other, to the extent of creating block lists that you can just subscribe and click and bye TERF (Trans-exclusionary radical feminist), bye racist, bye paedophile,"* said Veeda.

Lily recently started blocking trolls on her Twitter and it has been great for her so far. She would pre-emptively block trolls and it did not matter if the harassment was directed at her or other women. Since then, she notices she has seen less discriminatory tweets. *"Especially the meninists, they're in it for the engagement. I think they want you to engage and it gets them attention. So that's an attention economy that I don't want to be part of at all. I actually think that the most effective thing I can do is not to address or counter them, but to deny them that attention. so I would just pre-emptively block them if I see they're doing that shit"*, said Lily.

Zainab had to unfriend her former university mates on Facebook who had made transphobic comments and jokes. Some of them were her closest girl friends back then. She confronted them and asked, *"Do you have any issue with people like me? And all this while when we were in college, you are not comfortable with me"*

sitting next to you? Or in the same car as well?" They insisted that it is not appropriate because transwomen are considered men. Eventually, she had to disengage, and unfriend some of them. Similarly, Zainab was also blocked by her friends who think she is too much for posting contents on LGBTQ rights. Now, Zainab would also pre-emptively unfriend whenever a user shares discriminatory posts. *"I won't say my friends have reduced. Those friends have been replaced...That would be easier, I don't need to have that in my circle"*, said Zainab.

Suzie too had to lose a friend over differences of views on transwomen. This happened a few weeks before the interview. *"It's kinda brutal isn't it? To lose someone you are friend with or you are close with just because of your different opinion, but that actually happened"*, said Suzie.

Blocking, disengaging and unfriending are important tactics for many women in this research when it comes to dealing with online gender-based violence and in order to not expose themselves to hateful narratives and attacks. These tactics have become important to sustain the feminist movement and for self-preservation. At the same time, social media algorithms serve to divide us into echo chambers and the act of blocking and unfriending may further deepen this divisive echo chambers. Similarly, for those who do not agree with us, they too would block and unfriend those who push for views opposing their beliefs.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

Given the breakdown of institutional support, the burden of redressing online gender-based violence has shifted from the institutions to the victims, from public to private and to individual obligations. Many women have pushed back against violence by employing feminist vigilantism against aggressors or perpetrators. Feminist vigilantism has primarily focused on naming and shaming approaches, such as establishing blogs, web sites and hashtags that are used to republish offensive

material that might otherwise have only been viewed by recipients.<sup>134</sup>

Lisa, in her early twenties, college student, a participant at the workshop but who had refused to be interviewed, shared her experience of naming and shaming a local bar on Twitter for protecting perpetrators. Her friend was not only drugged, but almost got kidnapped and raped at the bar. They tried to report the incident to the bar owner, who initially said he would take care of it, but who eventually dismissed their complaint. Her tweet about the incident went viral and the bar manager finally met up with Lisa and her friend to resolve the issue. However, Lisa mistrusted the bar manager's promise to resolve the incident and deleted the tweet upon his request. No action was taken after that and Lisa decided to not talk about the issue anymore as her friend wanted to put it to rest and move on.

In a different and less extreme end of naming and shaming, Treena screenshot all the hateful comments and insults against her when she spoke about rape. She collated them all on a long Twitter thread. Some of the aggressors direct messaged her in private requesting her to remove their tweets, and some had begged her repeatedly to take it down and even apologised to her. When asked if she thought they were sincere, Treena said, *"No. Whatever people apologise for things they said online, they don't actually mean it especially when they just deleted it [and do nothing else to make amends]"*. Treena decided to not remove the tweets, as she felt it was a powerful moment and that she managed to reclaim her power and narrative.

Where it works, online vigilantism can be empowering to a certain extent. It is, however, not the same case for everyone. In 2017, a girl exposed a rape joke that targeted her in an all-boys WhatsApp group chat. In the group chat, the boy said, *"She gonna kena (Translation: get) rape from me, then must marry me"*, in which all

<sup>134</sup> Emma A. J. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist vigilantism. *Continuum*, 30:3, 284-297

the other boys replied with laughter. She tried to file a complaint to the college office but was immediately dismissed as overreacting. She decided to bring it to Twitter afterwards. Her tweet blew up and garnered much public attention. The day after her tweet blew up, she was called into the college's office and was reprimanded for posting this on social media and was intimidated into deleting it.<sup>135</sup> What followed afterwards was a public discussion on the rape joke and the girl's decision to name and shame the boy. Aside from solidarity messages, she was also accused of being punitive, ruining the boy's reputation, overreacting and some had intimidated her into deleting her tweets. Eventually, her parents disenrolled her from the college as the environment was becoming too hostile and unsafe for her.

Gwen was a student from the boy's college and she too was part of the public discussion on social media. She questioned on Twitter why the college did nothing. She was attacked and labelled a "triggered feminist" and "too sensitive". Many said to her that the girl should not have taken it to Twitter as she was not in any actual danger. Gwen lost a lot of friends during this time.

The boy was eventually suspended from college for two weeks and he made a public apology on his Facebook too.<sup>136</sup> In his apology post, he claimed that he too had received threats and harassment online.

The culture of online vigilantism is reflective of the fourth wave's feminist movement: individualized, micropolitical and do-it-yourself action.<sup>137</sup> They had proven to be effective in creating awareness and public discourse. However, often the individual bears the risks and costs i.e. physical security, isolation, alienation, mental health, potential defamation suits, and employment security. Even when women take up the labour of

naming and shaming aggressors, their efforts are unwanted, punished and viewed as vigilantism or cries of victimhood.

All the above-mentioned women refused to sit and wait for the authorities to fix the issue of the online gender-based violence they faced, and are outstripping the institutional barriers to justice by doing-it-themselves. During the workshop, the participants agreed that the naming and shaming tactic gave them a sense of empowerment and agency. Ironically, the experience of going to law enforcers or institutions can sometimes render them helpless as they are often gaslighted into believing that the violence is not real. However, as with the case of the rape joke over a WhatsApp chat group in a college, the act of naming and shaming her aggressor raises questions of ethical boundaries. Gwen believes it can be confusing for bystanders as most people are fixated in pinpointing one victim versus one aggressor, where both experienced online violence. It also does not address the fundamental structural barriers to redress for victims and overlook the fact that the so-called aggressor is likely a boy in his formative years and who happened to be a by-product of the broader toxic masculinity in society. His rape joke was made two weeks after a Member of Parliament spoke in the parliament that a rape victim's future is not bleak if she could marry her rapist and she will have a husband eventually.<sup>138</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The issues of online gender-based violence requires a multifaceted strategy given that it involves a messy tangle of conflicting rights between freedom of expression, right to political participation and right to non-discrimination and safety, within a complex system that reinforces and reproduces inequalities. It also involves globally dispersed actors—the State, the

135 Khor, S. (2017, 25 April). Girl Who Exposed Sexist Group Chat Has Dropped Out Of College In Fear For Her Own Safety. *Says*. [says.com/my/news/girl-who-tweeted-about-rape-joke-had-to-give-up-scholarship-for-her-own-safety](https://says.com/my/news/girl-who-tweeted-about-rape-joke-had-to-give-up-scholarship-for-her-own-safety)

136 Thiagarajan, T. (2017, 20 April). Female University Student Exposed Guys Joking About Rape, One of Them Apologises. *World of Buzz*. [worldofbuzz.com/female-student-exposes-rape-joked/](https://worldofbuzz.com/female-student-exposes-rape-joked/)

137 Emma A. Jane (2016), Op cit.

138 Anand, R. (4 April, 2017). Future 'not bleak' for victims if they marry their rapists, Umno MP says. *The Malay Mail Online*. [malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2017/04/04/future-not-bleak-for-victims-if-they-marry-their-rapists-umno-mp-says/1349427](https://malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2017/04/04/future-not-bleak-for-victims-if-they-marry-their-rapists-umno-mp-says/1349427)

people, and the digital platforms that are often located in different jurisdictions.

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have shown repeated commitment to improve their platforms to address online gender-based violence. Many of their redress mechanisms include a content moderation system, reporting and flagging by users and a set of blocking and filtering tools that help users manage the contents and narratives they are exposed to. As transpired by the women's experiences, these mechanisms are proven to be far from adequate to address online gender-based violence and they too can be abused by aggressors to silence women and vulnerable communities. The research has shown how violence is contextual and some are normalised in our public discourse. The design and infrastructure of social media can fuel and encourage hate. In particular, the underlying economic structure of platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram that relies on interactions among people. Algorithms are designed to maximise the spread of viral content and this often include inflammatory contents. While it is important to improve the reporting mechanism and policy around content moderation and community standards, we should also interrogate the infrastructure and design of the platforms so that the space is actively addressing the underlying inequalities and not amplifying it.

It is imperative that the State should do their due diligence in preventing and protecting its people from online gender-based violence. The criminal justice system should be made accessible to victims. It is critical that a victim/survivor-centric approach should be considered including gender-responsive laws and policies, adequate training for law enforcers to deal with online gender-based violence, ability of law to provide immediate protection for victims in more critical cases (i.e. doxxing and non-consensual dissemination of images) etc. Dealing with online gender-based violence also requires us to look at a range of behaviours that do not fall under the criminal standard. To address these types of behaviours will require programmes and strategies that aim at changing the mindset by educating the public on human rights and gender

equality and ensuring gender diversity at decision making-levels including in Parliament, the public service sector and in Ministerial positions.

Despite the inadequacy of institutional support when it comes to addressing online gender-based violence, women have mobilised among themselves to reclaim the digital space using different tactics and strategies. Many women are doing this in their individual capacities with support and solidarity from the network of feminists online. Moving forward, there is a need to explore how we can forge these pockets of initiatives into a more systematised and collective hybrid activist strategy in pushing back against all forms of gender-based violence.

# 5

## MOVING FORWARD



## CHAPTER FIVE

# MOVING FORWARD

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Social media as a space for expression is highly contested where gender norms are persistent and yet, women are constantly pushing back and disrupting the normative discourse, at the risk of experiencing aggression and violence. The relatively easier access to self-expression and self-representation means women are better enabled to control their narratives and in some cases, to negotiate the risk of their visibility online using different tactics. It accords women some level of autonomy over their performance and expression of self with different audiences or networks of people, and in managing the content of their narratives at different settings. Balancing tactics of self-expression and risk-management are essential for many women in a society where gender equality is yet to be a reality.

After an incident of online gender-based violence, some women might deactivate or sign out of their social media accounts, but eventually they come back online. Retreating from social media is simply an impossibility now given how the online space is so interwoven with our being and the politics of the world. These resistances toward patriarchy and gender norms on social media are political and powerful; they act as a focal point that network other women who shared similar lived experiences. They are living proof of our existence, resistance and collective strength.

Therefore, countering online gender-based violence does not stand in contradiction with freedom of expression. If anything, it requires an expansion of that freedom so that women and vulnerable groups can express themselves without the risk of reprisal from the State and non-State actors. Addressing online gender-

based violence means holding people accountable for their individual power and privilege. It means to be actively aware that we live in a world where systemic discrimination against women is normalised and often reproduced in the social media space. Therefore, to stay neutral is to perpetrate the systemic discrimination. It requires us to understand that freedom of expression is not equally accorded to everyone and online gender-based violence is an important manifestation of unequal gender-power dynamics that dominates all sphere of lives.

Further research is needed to unpack the motivations and the realities of aggressors who perpetrate online gender-based violence. Aggressors are grounded in their own realities and some of these are coming from a place of insecurity over their national identity as a man, more so a Malay Muslim man in Malaysia, where the politicisation of a purist, non-feminist, non-liberal Malay Muslim man is the only version of a Malay Muslim man that is deemed acceptable. In this sense, aggressors do see themselves as part of the movement defending the rights of a victimised group. The appropriation of human rights language is of particular concern and it requires an internal reflection of our current strategies and tactics as feminists and women.

The second area of work that needs more exploration is to better define our demands of social media companies. Addressing online gender-based violence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram requires more than just content moderation and content take down. This requires a rethinking of our aspirational principles for the platforms' infrastructure that will enable healthier

and more nuanced discourses for the public and which will locate human rights and gender equality at the core of its design.

Despite the commonality in the women's experiences, online gender-based violence is a highly personal experience for victims based on their intersectionality and social location. Our socio-economic status would determine our access to justice and therefore resulting in different levels of redress, if at all, for victims. At this juncture, more research and documentation are required with women from rural areas, indigenous women, the refugee community, and so on.

Addressing online gender-based violence requires more than just government intervention, particularly for normalised abusive behaviours that do not fall under criminal behaviour, and individual actions that lead to aggregate harm. It also does not mean putting forward solutions that are exclusively for the digital sphere. Given that the root cause of online gender-based violence lies in structural gender-based discrimination, the elimination of online gender-based violence would also mean addressing these entrenched inequalities. It requires all stakeholders—technology companies, government, law makers, and civil society to establish a set of acceptable behaviours and values that permeates our everyday life. Ultimately, this means having regular dialogues and collaborations with different actors to uproot what has been normalised in our society.

