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Gender, Islam, and Religiosity: Working Malay Women's Agency in Navigating Gender Relations and Subjectivity

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the nuanced agency of working Malay women in urban Malaysia, specifically focusing on how they navigate gender relations in both workplace and family settings within the contexts of Islamic religiosity and modernization. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with six Malay women, this research investigates the interplay between their professional lives and Islamic identity. The study applies Saba Mahmood's theoretical framework on agency, which posits that agency is context-specific and shaped by historical and cultural conditions, to understand how these women reconcile traditional Islamic values with modern gender norms.

The research reveals that working Malay women's agency is characterized by a dual influence of Islamization and modernization, where their religious practices coexist with modern ideologies. This agency manifests in cultivating virtues such as spirituality, resilience, and piety, which are crucial for their personal and professional growth. The study challenges the reductionist view that portrays Muslim women's agency solely as resistance to patriarchal structures, highlighting instead their active role in shaping their subjectivities within the given socio-religious framework.

Furthermore, the thesis discusses the broader implications of these women's experiences for the feminist discourse on gender equality and Islam. It argues that their navigation of multiple tensions between economic needs, globalized ideologies, and religious expectations offers a more generative understanding of agency. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on the compatibility of gender equality with Islam by incorporating the voices and experiences of urban working Malay women into the academic discourse. By examining the lived realities of these women, this thesis provides

insights into the complex dynamics of gender, religion, and modernity in contemporary Malaysia, thereby enriching the scholarly understanding of Muslim women's agency beyond the conventional liberalist critiques.

Keywords: *Gender Relations; Agency; Religiosity; Working Malay Women; Muslim Women's Agency; Religious Identity; Islamic Virtues; Feminist Discourse*

Introduction

The acceleration of neo-liberal globalization in the 1980s in the Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia as one of the most successful developing economies, has brought a wave of women workers entering the labor force (Ng et al., 2006). A new state ideology, the *Rukunegara* (The National Principle), envisioned a modernized Malay society where Malays' identities as decent modern citizens would be constructed through collective aims of national capital accumulations (Ong, 1990). At the same time, the rise of Islamic resurgent movement, the *dakwah* movement, was calling for a return of pure Islamist agenda, a predilection of orthodox Islamism, promoting traditional gendered roles such as women's domestic and maternal labor (Frisk, 2009). An issue emerged from the conflicts in the state and religious ideologies: Malay women, whose Muslim identities are mandated by the law and culture, have to explore and negotiate the aspects of economic needs and the different ideologies of the state and religion in relation to women's issues.

On the other hand, the mainstream portray of Muslim women in secularist point of view is usually homogeneous, mostly giving a misrepresentative image of them as docile, mysterious, and conservative. Such portray fails to capture their individualities and subjectivities, and denies the variations in culture, geographics, times, etc. that constantly vitalize Islam as a global religion. While Islam in the Southeast Asia is generally recognized as syncretistic and localized, differing from the orthodox and 'fanatical' counterpart in the Middle East (Mohiuddin, 2018). Either solely the inattentive and oversimplified description of Muslim women or the conception of parochialized Islam in Southeast Asia cannot draw a comprehensive understanding of Malay Muslim women. Moreover, at this unprecedented age of globalization when international connection has

never been easier than before, Malay women from urban areas have more exposure to the modernized perceptions of gender relations. It draws my attention to study how this particular group of Malay women make sense of the intertwined connections between the world and surroundings, and how they react to diverse gender norms on a level of reality and consciousness.

This essay looks closely at Malay women whose identities are deeply ingrained with Islam as well as working, a role that was not religiously assigned to women in the past. The intersection in Malay women's social and religious identities brings more possibilities for the account of their subject formation. Meanwhile, some scholars have critically pointed out the tendency of narrowing Muslim women's agency down to outright resistance against dominant and patriarchal structures (Mahmood, 2001; Frisk, 2009; McNay, 2000). The purpose of this research is to fill the gap in perception of Muslim women's subjectivity within feminist scholarships and offer a new lens to observe Malay women's agency which are not seen existed with Muslim women from a liberalist critique. Hence, studying how urban working Malay women navigate themselves through the multiple tensions, though their navigation cannot be simply equated with resistance, offers insights for a more generative knowledge of agency. It is also an endeavor to respond a classical feminist debate of incompatibility of gender equality with Islam by including working Malay women's voices to the discourse.

In this thesis, I pinpoint working Malay women's agency in navigating gender relations in the workplace and family, and how religiosity plays a significant role in shaping their gender perceptions and subject formation. I collected qualitative data from online face-to-face interviews with six interlocutors and their follow-ups in written form. I ground

my analysis in Mahmood's theoretical framework that the explanation of agency cannot be predetermined before examining the specific networks of concepts that facilitate particular ways of being, responsibility, and effectiveness if the power to bring about change in the world and in oneself is shaped by historical and cultural contexts (Mahmood, 2001). Extending from Mahmood’s argument that an ideal theoretical framework of agency should be continuously evolving, receptive and context-specific, I argue that working Malay women’s agency in relation to gender practices is marked both by Islamization and modernization, for they are actively practicing Islam while incorporating the familiar modern ideologies. Their agency also manifests in cultivating Islamic virtues that serves the growth of spirituality, resilience, and piety.

Literature Review

The concept of agency has evolved from philosophical inquiries about free will and moral responsibility to interdisciplinary explorations of how individuals navigate and shape their social and political environments. In sociology and anthropology, agency is frequently examined with an emphasis on the interplay between societal structures and individual actions. The term ‘autonomy’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘agency’ (Davies, 1991), but it is essential to distinguish between the two for precise terminology and arguments. Although there are overlaps and ambiguities between agency and autonomy, both terms involve the process of subject formation which cannot be fully understood without acknowledging social and cultural constructs (Bevir, 1999).

Autonomy is commonly defined by the presence of an "authentic self," shaped by the belief system an individual develops via his recognition and assimilation of the external

motivational influences and a “distinct self-identity” (Feinberg, 1989; Abrams, 1999, p.808), or the “internal motivational structure of the actor” (Dworkin, 1988, p.60; Abrams, 1999, p.812). The self is mature enough to differentiate between external influences and internal motivations (Dworkin, 1988; Feinberg, 1989; Abrams, 1999). In feminist narrative, autonomy can be observed when women's actions align with their "authentic interests"(Mishra & Tripathi, 2011, p.60) emanate from the authentic self.

Clearly, the concept of autonomy acknowledges the complexities of power and social influence. Ideally, a fully autonomous individual can resist the effects of knowledge and norms created by disciplinary power. This means that, in a perfect scenario, an autonomous person can experience, reason, adopt beliefs, and act independently of social contexts (Bevir, 1999). This independence does not require living outside of society because societal power/knowledge regimes do not decisively shape their beliefs, desires, reasoning, or actions (Bevir, 1999). However, from a Foucauldian perspective, the idea of a "sovereign, founding subject" is impossible. Even when individuals appear to live by self-chosen commitments, they are still managing their lives according to prevailing power structures (Foucault & Hurley, 1990; Bevir, 1999).

Despite varying scholarly arguments about the existence of autonomy, including "self-authenticity," there is a general consensus on the acceptance of agency. It is widely agreed that an individual cannot completely escape the power structure; distinguishing between one's "authenticity" and external influence is implausible, let alone negating these impacts by identifying power sources. Agency is considered more plausible than autonomy because it is defined as the capacity to make choices and practice self-direction, with less emphasis on the "self-authenticity" that drives one's desires. The reason "self-authenticity" is less

emphasized in relation to agency is not the irrelevance of socialization and power relations in theorizing agency. Instead, it is because agency cannot be dismissed by assuming that the desires behind it are not entirely derived from autonomy or "self-authenticity." Otherwise, this would restrict our understanding of agency, exclude further discussion, and overlook the embodiment that can serve as an alternative to the dominant knowledge of agency, one of the two modalities of agency I wish to discuss first.

In the literature on agency, a common theme is framing agency as the effort and action to alter societal power structures and oppression. Bevir (1999) contends that agents exist within specific social contexts, but these contexts do not determine their self-making. Although agents inevitably function within regimes of power and knowledge, these regimes do not restrict their experiences, reasoning, beliefs, or actions. From a poststructuralist perspective, agency is seen as an illusion because one's desires are shaped by the discourses that position the subject and dictate what they want (Davies, 1991). However, Davies (1991) posits that an alternative form of agency can be reclaimed through poststructuralist theory. By navigating between discourses, a subject can understand how these discourses shape them and use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse, or transcend the other. This approach allows individuals to redefine their own subjectivity and choose how to relate to the subjectivities of others.

The argument presented here is that reclaiming agency, which is displaced by social construction, occurs only when the subject actively identifies and disrupts external controls and discursive formations. In other words, agency can be observed when an individual attempts to alter power relations and resist their subaltern status in society. Although it is impossible to completely escape power, since "structures are constituted through

practices," agency can emerge when a socially constructed subject engages in practices that challenge these structures (Davies, 1999, p. 52). From this perspective, power and structures are not just repressive but also productive, influencing individuals' actions, thoughts, and identities through discourses. Power operates within a network of relationships, and individuals are both subjects of and active participants in these power dynamics (Foucault, 1995).

Judith Butler refers to this as the paradox of subjectivation, where the same processes and conditions that enforce a subject's subordination also enable individuals to develop self-awareness and agency (1997; Mahmood, 2001). Butler (1990, 1993) argues that agency is exercised through the repetition of gendered performances, which are governed by social norms and conventions. These performances are not entirely free or autonomous; they are constrained by the regulatory frameworks of power that dictate what constitutes acceptable expressions of gender. However, within these constraints, there is room for subversion and transformation. This view posits that agency is not about transcending or escaping these norms but about working within them to create possibilities for change. One of the commonalities in these theories about agency is that by acting creatively and reflexively, individuals can challenge and alter societal norms and structures. Rinaldo (2013) identifies this agency as feminist agency, aiming to empower women by challenging their subordination in relation to men.

Saba Mahmood critiques the dominance of the liberalist paradigm of agency, arguing that it limits our ability to understand the lives of women whose identities and goals are shaped by non-liberal traditions (2005). Based on her study of Egyptian Muslim women's mosque movements that aimed to cultivate piety and practice Islamic virtues such as

shyness and modesty (al-hayāʾ), Mahmood (2001, 2005) contends that agency should not be solely defined as resistance to societal power relations and advocates for a broader interpretation of agency that considers different contexts. While recognizing the valuable contributions of the liberal and poststructuralist models to feminist scholarship, she proposes an alternative view of agency as "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 203). This approach allows those widely seen as subordinate, passive, or lacking freedom to be part of a nuanced discussion of agency rather than being dismissed as lacking it. Mahmood's effort to separate the concept of agency from a liberal framework enriches scholarly conversations by incorporating religious subjects into secular feminist discourses.

Building on Mahmood's theories, Rachel Rinaldo (2013) suggests two additional models of Muslim women's agency associated with piety. She specifies pious agency into 'pious critical agency' and 'pious activating agency' because the simple definition of "docile or nonliberal agency does not exhaust the possibilities for agency among pious women" (p. 19). Pious critical agency, according to Rinaldo, is the ability to make critical interpretations of sacred texts publicly. Pious activating agency manifests when Muslim women take actions in accordance with their critical interpretations of sacred texts. Additionally, Rinaldo problematizes the noticeable tendency of situating feminist agency and pious agency as antithetical. Her two modalities of pious agency imply that piety can converge with the feminist agenda, which is characterized by a critical examination of patriarchy and social mobilization.

Background

Demographic and Religion

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, with *Bumiputera* (inclusive of Malay and Indigenous) comprising more than 60 percent of the total population, Chinese less than 25 percent, and Indians 7 percent (Malaysia Department of Information, 2016). he federal constitution of Malaysia designates Islam as the religion of the Federation while ensuring the peaceful practice of other religions. It specifically defines a "Malay" as a citizen who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom (Malaysian Federal Constitution, 1957, Article 160(2)). This definition indicates the constitutional requirement for all ethnic Malays in Malaysia to be Muslims.

Malaysia operates under a dual legal framework where both federal laws and Shariah laws—the Islamic legal system derived from the Quran and the hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad)—govern personal and family issues specifically for the Muslim population. This means that ethnic Malays who convert to another religion, such as Christianity, risk breaking the law and facing punishment under Shariah law. Although federal regulations do not necessarily rule out the possibility of Malays secularizing and converting to other religions, the ethnic identity of Malays underlies their common religious identity as Muslims.

Compared to other predominantly Muslim countries with small ethnic minorities, the ruling Malays must be more careful with interreligious and interethnic balance: they cannot lose Islamic dominance, nor can they forcibly assimilate non-Malays. Therefore, problems have arisen due to Malaysia's unique ethnic composition. Achieving national unity has been complicated by the global resurgence of Islam in Malaysia (Milne &

Mauzy, 2020). Questions such as how Islam can be reconciled with the modernization process and how its Islamic values can be promoted without alienating non-Muslims have occupied much of the attention of Malaysia's leaders even now.

Islamization and Globalization

Within the two to three decades after Malaysia gained its independence from the British on 1957, it leaped into the team of "the Asian mini-Tigers," being one of the second-tier developing members of Newly Industrializing Economies in Asia. The introduction of the New Economic Policy in response to the May 13 riots, a violent outcome of the antagonism between Malays and Chinese due to economic inequality, played a crucial role in the rapid growth of industrialization. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad emphasized the urgency of transforming the Malaysian economy as he observed the widening wealth gap between Malays and Chinese. The only solution, according to Mahathir, is to create a new class of Malay, a competitive *Bumiputera* business class, i.e., the *Melayu Baru* (New Malay). He viewed *Melayu Baru* as beneficial not only to Malays but also to Muslims of other ethnicities (Embong, 2001).

Around the same period, the *dakwah* movement, also known as the Islamic resurgence movement in Malaysia, emphasized traditional gender roles for women, focusing on taking care of husbands and children rather than earning an income. This was particularly evident from the early 1970s when a far-reaching political Islamization movement, the *dakwah* movement, emerged with various objectives and strategies but shared the aim of strengthening faith among Malays. The *dakwah* movement emphasizes Islam as "a contemporary alternative to Western modernity and stresses the separation of the orthodox,

modern form of Islam from the older, syncretic, localized version" (Frisk, 2009, p.7). The movement later gained significant support from the government, with Mahathir Mohamad playing a critical role in mainstreaming it. He recognized the importance of Malaysia catching up with globalization and industrialization while enhancing its global influence within the Islamic world, consolidating Malay ethnic identity, and securing political rights to gain votes.

Additionally, the rise of modern Islamic fundamentalism in the early 20th century, which significantly developed in the 1970s, also influenced the *dakwah* movement. Fan (2009) argues that Islamic fundamentalism contributed to the birth of the *dakwah* movement, advocating for the strict application of Sharia law and the establishment of an Islamic State to counter Western aggression aimed at replacing indigenous culture and customs. Women were central to the Islamic resurgence agenda because women's issues were the main locus of colonial discursive attacks against Islam and Arab culture, and they were critical in the purification and protection of Islam (Ahmed, 1992). The tendency to embrace conservative policies was a means of preserving traditions and recovering from colonial damage to Malaysian indigeneity. Both the *dakwah* movement, which responded to Islamic fundamentalist movements in the Middle East, and the New Economic Policy were designed to help Malaysia gain international standing in the era of globalization.

International connections among Islamic countries are not limited to fundamentalist ideologies but also encompass efforts in social and religious reform and theological exchange. These reformative attempts to reshape social, political, and religious norms intensified the power dynamics within Islam, as religious leaders competed to define Islamic beliefs, norms, and practices (Reddig, 2012). Before the state under Mahathir's

regime sought to blend Islamization with modernization to stabilize social order and promote international integration, reformist thinkers were already globalizing an anti-fundamentalist discourse of Islam. They were acutely aware of power dynamics and actively engaged in discussions about the nation's political and cultural future. Their goal was to create an Islamic framework that would elevate the political and economic status of Malay Muslims, offering guidance on resisting colonial rule and navigating life under it (Noor, 2008).

The reformist vision for Islam’s future was partly inspired by increased exposure to foreign Islamic scholars whose ideas were considered advanced and instructive for Malay Muslim communities. Early Malay reformists looked to scholars from the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Turkey, traveling to these regions and bringing back ideas that advocated for fundamental social, economic, and political changes (Noor, 2008). Unlike traditionalist Muslims, known as *kaum tua* ("old generation"), who strictly adhered to Islamic tradition and authority, reformists, or *kaum muda* ("new generation"), sought to integrate Islam with innovative thoughts and modernization. They believed that "true" Islam should demonstrate its compatibility with modernization, material and economic progress, and the spirit of rationalism and critical inquiry (Noor, 2008).

Despite the absence of a strict hierarchy of priesthood or a single authoritative center in Islam akin to Christianity (Asian, 2005), the *ulama* (chief religious authorities) still serve as the primary source of Islamic knowledge, maintaining a dominant position within the Muslim community. Traditionally, most Muslims believed that only the ulama had the right to speak on Islam, and those without systematic Islamic education were unqualified to publicly discuss it (Anwar, 2009). Consequently, traditionalists and old-fashioned religious

experts inevitably clashed with the new wave of rethinking and reconceptualizing Islam, as well as the rejection of the power structures that favored authoritative Islamic scholars and resisted significant transformation within Islam.

Claiming the authorship of personal interpretation of Islam is also the goal for many Muslim women and Muslim feminist activists, such as Sisters in Islam, who call for a rethinking of the sacred texts from a gender-equal lens. These activists have initiated the challenge to androcentric religious authority. Such efforts are not exclusive to activists but include many ordinary Malay women who are practicing their version of Islam in daily life, empowering women. However, some scholars suggest that Islamization and globalization have had negative influences on Malay women because both the state and *dakwah* movements have introduced patriarchal aspects of Muslim Arab or Middle Eastern gender relations, ultimately reinforcing gender segregation and inequality within Malay communities (Frisk, 2009; Ong, 1995; Norani, 1998). One outcome is that the government's legal reforms tend to lean conservative, particularly in the context of marriage and family law reforms, which compromise the interests of women. For example, with the introduction of Sharia law in some Malaysian states, the equal rights granted by *adat* law, a series of localized and unwritten customary laws, for men and women to inherit property and initiate divorce are circumvented (Jones, 1994; Anwar, 2009). Furthermore, the competition between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which advocates for a moderate Islam and a modern, progressive Malaysia, and the Islamist Party (PAS), which upholds fundamentalist Islamization, has resulted in an increase in discriminatory policies against Muslim women (Anwar, 2009).

In comparison, another consequence of globalization is that the growing economy

increases the demand for labor, allowing women to participate more actively in the economy. Women now play a significant economic role, working in various jobs in offices, factories, and shops (Koh & Ho, 2009). Since 1990, the participation of women in the labor force has increased. In 2023, the labor force participation rate among females was more than half (World Bank, 2023). (Footnote: This is the overall statistic for all female Malaysian citizens regardless of ethnicity. The labor force participation rate for Malay women specifically is unavailable.) Despite the increasing numbers of women entering the job market, scholars insist that there is little change in traditional gender roles (Koh & Ho, 2009).

Sisters in Islam (SIS): Islamic Feminist Activism in Malaysia

Responding to the mainstreaming of Islamic fundamentalist ideologies that restrict gender roles, several non-governmental feminist organizations have expressed opposition to influence the government's policy-making processes. One of the prestigious and influential national Islamic feminist non-governmental organizations in Malaysia, Sisters in Islam (SIS), is dedicated to promoting a feminist understanding of Islam by humanizing the sacred and highlighting the underlying androcentric nature of “institutionalized religious authority” (Basarudin, 2016).

Differing from the popular feminist approach of directly opposing large structures and propaganda, SIS places significant emphasis on re-examining fundamental Islamic sources within the Islamic framework, believing that the subordinated status of women arises from misinterpretations of these sources (Gürkan, 2018). SIS has been endeavoring to regain public space and authority for Muslim women in debates over the interpretation of Islam. They argue that the ulama's assertions about the Qur'an are not necessarily the truth Allah

wants to convey but are merely androcentric explanations that serve men's interests.

Operating at the intersection of theological and sociological judgment, their activism has brought notable changes to legal reforms. Exemplifying both *pious critical agency* and *pious activating agency*, as coined by Rinaldo (2013), SIS claims Muslim identity while simultaneously breaking stereotypes of the “docile and subordinate” nature of women in Islam. They are actively producing feminist knowledge of Islam, and their activism has profound effects on the transformation of Islamic tradition.

One example of SIS activism to promote gender equality and desirable gender relations within an Islamic framework is their 1996 Memorandum on Reform of the Islamic Family Laws on Polygamy. In this document, SIS challenges the legitimacy of polygamy, arguing that it stems from a misunderstanding of fundamental Islamic sources and God’s guidance. They support their arguments by referencing Islamic texts and demonstrating that the Qur'an and influential Islamic reformers endorse monogamy and gender equality in marriage (1996):

> *[The] emphasis on justice is further reinforced by verse 4:129, which states:*
>
> *You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire (Surah Al-Nisa, Verse 129).*
>
> *The letter and the spirit of the verse on polygamy, revealed following the tragedy of the battle of Uhud, is concerned with the overriding welfare and protection of women and children following the death of dozens of Muslim men in the still formative Muslim community of Medina. In those circumstances, Allah swt could have sanctioned the unlimited practice of polygamy of the time, but instead, Allah (s. wt.) restricted the practice to a maximum of four wives.*

By emphasizing the need for just conduct toward women and equal treatment of all wives, and acknowledging the impossibility of achieving this (Qur'an 4:129), verse 4:3 cannot be interpreted as promoting polygamy. It is not a directive for men to engage in polygamy. Instead, the verse advocates for monogamy as the original and ideal state of marriage in Islam. Influential reformers of the nineteenth century, such as Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, the Mufti of Egypt at the turn of the century, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Mumtaz Ali of the Indian subcontinent, viewed polygamy as a tolerated institution of the past that should now give way to the Qur'anic ideal of monogamy (SIS, 1996).

SIS argues that for issues not explicitly addressed in the Qur'an, the text should be seen as providing general and universal guidance rather than detailed regulations for every aspect of life. Muslims are thus required to adhere to the fundamental principles of the Qur'an and adapt their actions to changing times and circumstances. Historical contextualization is crucial for SIS when interpreting certain Islamic customs that may not align with broader principles of gender equality. For instance, SIS views polygamy as a historically specific practice aimed at survival and recovery from wars and chaos, rather than satisfying men's desires. In modern times, where wars are no longer a threat to Malay Muslims, monogamy is seen as the preferred form of marriage. Additionally, while the Qur'an does not explicitly require husbands to obtain their wives' consent before marrying additional women, ignoring the moral obligation to do so is inherently unjust to women in marriage.

SIS approaches the Qur’an from an alternative perspective that desexualizes the persuasive rhetoric of, in this case, the legitimacy of polygamy in terms of a remedy for men’s uncontrollable sexual desires. The reinterpretation of the Qur’an by SIS displays

their attempts to modify the androcentric understanding of God's guidance. It is also through a gender-sensitive lens because it captures the impartial gender hierarchy implied in the androcentric interpretation of the Qur'an. Such arguments not only prevent the secular criticism of Islam as inherently patriarchal but also further ensure the core of Islam as envisioning love, care, and justice for everyone.

SIS continued their advocacy for a review of Islamic Family Laws to ensure equal rights for Muslim women in marriage. Working with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), SIS argued that the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) (Amendment) Act of 2005 undermined women's rights in areas like divorce, maintenance, and polygamy. They pointed out the contradiction between this law and Article 8 of the Constitution, which guarantees gender equality, and highlighted its deviation from Qur'anic principles of justice (Basarudin, 2016). Their efforts raised public awareness about the disparity of rights between women and men in marriage and contributed to the review of the act. Their success is evidenced by several unprecedented achievements, such as the act being unprecedentedly sent to the attorney general's office instead of the religious department, and SIS being invited to join the Civil Law Committee to review the act (Basarudin, 2016). Furthermore, SIS concluded that gender equality must be deeply rooted at the state practical levels, conforming to the gender relations indicated in the Qur'an and state laws. They criticize the state for leaning towards Muslim men's personal desires without obeying the guidance of the Qur'an.

However, SIS often faces obstacles in decentralizing religious authorities and institutions from political and governmental control, as this challenges the religious authority and the monopoly of orthodox Qur'anic interpreters. The PAS and the

government's Religious Affairs Committee have accused SIS of lacking the right to discuss Islam because their members have not received systematic religious education, lack Islamic degrees from universities in Arabic countries, do not understand Arabic, and do not wear veils (Fan, 2009). Parallel criticism targets SIS's efforts to reinterpret the Qur'an, arguing that they are misattributing it to the Prophet's words and analyzing it based on Muhammad's gender and lived experience as a man, rather than viewing the Qur'an as the direct word of God (Bakhshizadeh, 2023). Furthermore, SIS is condemned for endorsing Western feminist ideologies, particularly Western liberalism and secularism, and for promoting extreme religious pluralism (Ismail, 2023). Some scholars believe that SIS's reinterpretations often distort the original texts to align with modern feminist ideals, leading to misinterpretations of Islamic teachings and deconstruction of established religious norms (Ghazali, et al., 2020; Shukri & Owoyemi, 2015), and SIS's views on gender equality contradict traditional Islamic scholarship and create confusion among Muslims (Shukri & Owoyemi, 2015).

Methodology

Data Collection and Limitations

This research is based on interviews with six Malay women who have full-time jobs, live in urban areas, and are proficient in English[1]. I conducted online interviews via Zoom,

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[1] The language use in Malaysia is diverse. Malays speak the Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*) and have different levels of proficiency in English. English is one of the official languages in Malaysia due to British colonization and increasing needs for transnational business cooperation, but greater fluency in English requires higher familial investment in education, particularly in urban areas where educational resources generally are better.

each lasting between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The narratives included in this paper were transcribed from our meeting recordings by an online transcribing tool, TurboScribe, and were manually checked and slightly modified for clarity. The interview questions remained flexible throughout the research, with follow-up questions asked when participants mentioned personal attitudes, unfamiliar cultural practices, Islamic beliefs, and customs.

Participants were recruited through online channels, friends and acquaintances, and snowball sampling, with most being introduced by friends.[2] The limitations of my research include its focus on middle-class women with higher education levels, enabling them to speak fluent English. Additionally, the geographic concentration of the sample may affect the generalizability of the analysis. For instance, Kelantan, governed by the PAS with its goal of establishing an ideal Islamic state, is one of the most conservative states in Malaysia (Salleh, 1999), but my participants mainly come from Selangor, where the political climate is more diverse and moderate. Due to limited access to a broader sampling pool, participants' personal priorities, time constraints, and the complexity of wider recruitment, I was unable to recruit participants from every state in Malaysia. Therefore, the limitations of my research include the lack of representation of Malay women living in various

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[2] Throughout the sampling and interactions with my informants, none of them self-identified as feminists, nor did I explicitly mention "feminism," which might be heavily associated with secularist views. Azza Basarudin addresses the challenge of defining Islamic feminist parameters in her book on Sisters in Islam, noting that labeling is not central to their activism. They consider "the process of naming or labeling as inconsequential, divisive, and, more importantly, carrying the baggage of colonialism and imperialism" (2016, pp. 186-187). Thus, my study aims to move away from labeling and homogenizing, focusing instead on uncovering empowering elements that have yet to be recognized within the mainstream feminist framework. I seek to hear the most authentic opinions from my informants. To achieve this, I avoid mentioning feminism and related symbolic terms that could skew responses toward mainstream views rather than genuine perspectives.

contexts.

Meet the Interlocutors[3]

Ayu (45, married) has been working in Putrajaya, the administrative center of Malaysia, for 20 years in the government sector. She lives in Bangi, Selangor, located on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

Nazir (29, single) lives in Johor Bahru, located in the southern part of Malaysia and only a ten-minute drive away from Singapore. Before attending graduate school, she worked as a communication strategist in the government sector and then joined a private company.

Javana (31, married) is a program associate in a private company that primarily trains smallholders in the oil palm industry in Selangor. She also works part-time as a tutor.

Alina (31, married) works as a planning executive in the manufacturing sector in Chaalam, Selangor.

Hiyam (24, engaged) is a contract executive in a developer firm related to the construction industry, working and living in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia.

Yuna (48, married) is an accounting assistant at a manufacturing company, living in Shah Alam, Selangor.

Every participant holds a bachelor's degree or higher. Ayu is on study leave pursuing her PhD in Environmental Policy. Nazir is pursuing her Master's degree in Communication.

Gender Interactions and Agency: Insights from Malay Working Women

[3] All the names appearing in the essay are pseudonyms for the sake of de-identifying research participants.

Despite the divergence in the political ideologies held by the state and Islamic authorities, the Islamists inadvertently support and further advance state and modernization policies (Basarudin, 2016). Islamization aligns with the state's capitalist interests by maintaining traditional gender ideologies, as the ruling coalition and the Islamist opposition are not always at opposite ends of the spectrum on women's rights (Basarudin, 2016, p. 40; Frisk, 2009, p. 53). On this basis, I approached interviews with the presumption that working Malay women would share similar experiences and perceptions about stereotypical gender roles and gender disparities. For example, globally in the workplace, female employees are less likely to be team leaders and are assigned easier tasks compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, the unbalanced power relations between female and male workers can be intensified by resource allocation that favors male employees.

Equal Working Environment in Perception

To validate my proposition, I asked the participants to describe an interaction with their male co-workers, expecting that many responses would highlight negative experiences. Initially, they were puzzled, unsure of the specific type of stories I wanted to hear. I clarified that it could be any story that evoked emotions such as joy, sadness, or anger. Surprisingly, all responses indicated that the informants appreciated their gender-equal working environments, which were free from sexist remarks, discriminatory policies, hidden rules, and pay gaps.

Ayu appreciated that gender biases have never happened to her in the workplace. Despite her awareness of gender inequality as an intractable phenomenon, she felt fortunate

for her minimal experience of unfair treatment in the workplace: "I think if you talk about gender bias[es], there will always be gender bias[es] in the workplace. I am lucky that I don't really see that in front of my eyes, and I think that my career path has been very clear. I don't have that kind of situation." Alina, Yuna, and Hiyam insisted that they are treated equally in the workplace. Yuna holded identical feelings that there is little difference in how males and females are treated in the workplace, in terms of tasks, job requirements, and salary. Even though the job types may differ according to gender, with a higher percentage of male workers in production roles requiring a heavier workload, every employee is expected to present the same quality of work. Hiyam is satisfied with the gender equality manifested in her workplace.

Although Malay working women generally believe there is no disparity in the treatment of male and female employees in the workplace, the prevailing recognition of gender distinctions among employees influences daily interactions and work dynamics, particularly in situations considered more challenging for women compared to men. These perceptions underscore a notable difference in gender vulnerability, with women being more susceptible in such circumstances. Alina responded that sometimes women can be more advantaged because she noticed that male managers who often scream at male employees usually lower their voices when addressing female employees. To Alina, this is actually a bonus for female workers in her workplace, the production industry. Nazir also found most of her male co-workers to be caring, warmhearted, and considerate when she was dispatched to undesirable conditions with them, for example, late at night or in the midday sun as a newswriter to write reports:

"Sometimes news comes in, in the middle of the night, you know, I'm obligated with

my family since I'm the last child they have. The ability for me to work outside and my working hours like late night is quite hard, quite challenging. So, the team on the ground, they are not part of the communication strategist team, but they will be right on the ground and look and report back to me so that I can do all the writing or reporting and documentation while they are on the ground with me. That is a very nice gesture."

"And sometimes they are really mindful about my safety. I have to work with a lot of labor from, you know, the outside labor, not locally, but that work is kind of hard. I will need to stand under the sun for a long period of time. Sometimes they'll just cover me with an umbrella without me asking, that kind of gesture. Also, most of the time, they acknowledge that I'm a lady and I need to be treated with care."

For both working Malay women and their male colleagues, the perception of gender influences how they interact in the workplace. The "bonus" and "kind gesture" described by Alina and Nazir highlight a favorable paradigm for interactions between the two genders. Men are expected to be gentlemen and considerate of women, even though such gestures, known as acts of chivalry, imply that men see women as not as "strong" as themselves and therefore should be treated delicately. This is a typical interpretation of chivalry and gentlemen's behaviors as a benevolent form of sexism, perpetuating conventional ideologies of gender roles (Bria et al., 2020).

Where is Agency?

Yet it would be arbitrary to conclude that working Malay women are too docile to recognize the gender inequality underlying the "kindness" without examining their

understanding of gender roles and boundaries deeply constructed by culture and religion. Firstly, the interlocutors are capable of discerning that there is more than just kindness in regard to gender relations in the working environment. Ayu later reminisced that due to fixed gender roles, gender segregation in the public space can occur and influence work: "There are situations where sometimes the male bosses tend to group together with the male workers. They can go for golf, or they can go for what you call it yum cha, and karaoke somewhere, but we females, especially married ones, don't have that opportunity with some male bosses, so sometimes decisions are made on the golf courses, and you are not aware of it." However, Ayu suggested that she is strategically adept at handling such situations. She claimed, “But as a female, I believe that if those kinds of situations come to me, I will go and directly see my bosses, so I don't feel slighted, because I know that I have to face on with that kind of situation.” Notwithstanding gender as a factor acting out in many work-related situations, working Malay women precisely grasp this fact and believe they receive fair treatment in the workplace. To Ayu, substantial efforts to make her voice heard are more crucial to achieve the best work results because the gendered decision-making process that restricts female workers' entry is beyond her control.

Similarly, Javana places greater importance on the opportunity to communicate and collaborate fairly without restrictions in the workplace, rather than on the potential gender implications behind certain behaviors. She described a collaboration problem that she managed to solve with her male co-worker who had joined the company earlier. “He's lonely. Maybe before [I joined the team], he's very independent. He loves to do it himself.” Then she asked their supervisor to talk to him and to work like partners. After a month, they started to do the job together and could tolerate each other. Javana did not consider

the possibility that her working partner saw her as less capable and trustworthy due to her gender.

Sticking to similar beliefs, Nazir mentioned that gender is neither a matrix that delineates an employee's roles nor the reason she was criticized in her workplace. "I was treated equal[ly]. When it's time of critic[ism], they don't see you as a lady or a man. When you did wrong, you did wrong. So, you have to take responsibility [for] the things that you did." There could be mean words from higher managers, but to Nazir, it is not personal, though it can hurt. "He's angry at our work, with the quality of our work, because he needs to, we all as a team need to deliver the best possible quality of work." The boss’s anger was not perceived as related to her gender but rather his dissatisfaction with her performance as an employee. To her, the distinction between female and male workers' duties is not clearly delineated by gender. The common expectation to deliver the best outcomes at work indicates that Nazir shares an equal sense of duty and engagement in her workplace.

The interlocutors also pointed out that the gender biases against female workers can be prevalent in the workplace, although they believed they rarely experienced it themselves. Javana reflected on the difficulties women may face in industries requiring hard labor: "Being a woman in the agriculture industry, oil palm industry, maybe it's quite difficult. The hard work like pruning or harvesting the fruits, but there won't be a problem to become a Muslim and a woman in my industry [because our work is to train smallholders in the oil palm industry]." Hiyam suggested that her working environment is women-friendly “in terms of easier to climb the corporate ladder or get promotion based on their performance and not on their gender,” but acknowledged that working in a male-dominated industry can still be challenging. She works in a department of a developer firm where all

four managers are women and feels treated equally at work. However, in other contractor companies within the construction industry, Hiyam observed divisions in gender roles, “you will definitely see a lot of gender roles where women mostly do administrative work and men do the physical work.” Ayu also noted that gender stereotypes, such as men being more emotionally stable and women being considered irrational in decision-making, are prevalent. She strongly disagreed with these stereotypes, citing examples of women bosses making objective and comprehensive decisions. Nazir does not object to the idea that men are stronger in emotional stability, as she was once helped by male co-workers who were more composed in the face of critique. As a new employee, she was scolded by her managers during meetings, but some male co-workers reassured her that it was fine, sharing worse experiences they had witnessed. Their comfort helped her feel better and reminded her of her responsibility in the workplace.

Although the question of whether men and women differ in emotional stability could be debated between Ayu and Nazir, Nazir demonstrates a similar agentive capacity to Ayu’s. Believing the difference in emotional stability between men and women is an uncontrollable fact, she deals with the discrepancy by embracing her feelings and talking to the manager after both parties have calmed down to see what corrections can be made collectively. Nazir focuses on how she addresses the issues at hand. She explained that Islam teaches her to be straightforward in every situation, which is her primary strategy in solving problems. "In my religion, you are not supposed to assume things [happening in the way you want/meeting up your expectation]. When you don't know, you ask; when you think he is not being nice to you, you tell them. It's on them to make things right or to continue being that way."

Ayu believes that while there is a limit to what one person can achieve, what truly matters is whether she can independently take actions that influence events. Although it can be God who decides one's fate, it is up to humans to decide how to respond to their circumstances (Mahmood, 2001). She tried her best to express disagreements with decisions made during male co-workers' gatherings. Instead of condemning the male-exclusive gatherings where decisions can be made, she is more concerned about whether the communication channel between her and the upper managers is two-way and unobstructed. She values being informed about decisions discussed by male employees and having the right to comment on those decisions. To her, the ability to convey her opinions to upper managers is more important than being included in male-exclusive gatherings. Whether the higher administration changes its mind or maintains the same decisions is out of her control. "I think that I've done my best, so I'll just let Allah decide for it."

The interlocutors' perceptions of the workplace are neither non-gendered nor unaffected by gender; rather, they see the role of gender in affecting workplace dynamics as neutral. The reasoning behind this neutrality is that, as women, their rights and capacity to counteract the effects of male-exclusive decision-making are ensured in the workplace. Nazir’s view appears to differ from Ayu's regarding who is most accountable for influencing outcomes, but the core similarity is that Islam empowers their agency in promoting transparent and equal communicative relationships. Nazir demonstrated her communicative strategies derived from Islam to address tensions with her boss: "At least we tell them. That is what my religion teaches me." Nazir firmly believes that in dealing with interpersonal problems in the workplace, what matters most is whether she takes the appropriate action, knowing that outcomes can remain uncertain despite her efforts.

Similarly, Nazir's agency lies in her determination to engage in conversations, while the outcomes are beyond her control. The underlying logic remains consistent: her actions are less result-oriented and more process-oriented. From a liberal standpoint, it may seem that she is yielding control of her fate to others, but from Nazir's perspective, she holds the power to act, influencing the course of her fate as designed by God.

Therefore, the main point is the extent to which one tries to alter their fate, as ultimately, God holds them accountable for their effort. In Ayu's other response, her positivity should be interpreted as a strong and flexible mentality granted by Islam, reflecting robust agency in dealing with obstacles and making choices. "I don't see any glass ceiling anywhere, or perhaps I'm not that ambitious, so I guess I'll just take whatever is in front of me, or if there's any hurdle, I will just go some other way." Their capacity to make decisions and act accordingly based on an autonomous religious interpretation of challenges associated with gender relations in work delegitimizes the perception of working Malay women as passive and failing to act in the face of oppression.

Their responses to structural disadvantages in the workplace, such as glass ceilings or male-only gatherings, are difficult to categorize as resistance in the conventional sense, which typically implies overt efforts to express opposition and take action against the patriarchal structure (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Direct opposition and defiant actions are not evident in the narratives of working Malay women. It may appear that they overlook or underestimate the gender regulations embedded within work discipline during the era of modernization and global capitalism, where individuals are easily symbolized and instrumentalized as employees. They might also be naively optimistic about their situation as women, historically and socially constructed objects. Nevertheless, such a perspective

assumes the objectivity of working Malay women, overlooking their agency in taking seemingly "trivial" steps, which is rarely captured in the liberal activism framework. It also dismisses the religious aspects constructing their subjectivity and agency in interpreting workplace challenges. As highlighted by Mahmood, the analysis of Muslim women's agency should be based on a clear understanding of the Islamic imaginary "in which humans are considered to be only partially responsible for their own actions, versus an imaginary in which humans are regarded as the sole authors of their actions" (2005, p.168). What working Malay women have done in the exploration of gender dynamics in the workplace is to exercise her authorship in mapping out a space that in her perception, is equated with her male counterparts'. In the cases discussed above, their authorship is embodied in ensuring their queries, feelings, concerns are equally expressed, especially when the communicative channels are less easily accessible for women in the workplace.

Marking their presence and expressing their opinions in the workplace can also profoundly impact promoting gender equality. It highlights the power of presence, signifying that one's voice is equally important in the public domain, even though complete gender equality has not yet been achieved (Bayat, 2013). Their perception of the working environment as gender-equal can contribute to their application of the power of presence, because the very act of placing themselves by default at a status that is not yet fully accessible on a societal level is, in itself, a strong negotiation and statement. It also urges us to rethink such agency and subjectivity that do not align with familiar liberal activist doctrines should be given more attention and recognition.

Head of Family's Permission to Work: Patriarchal Oppression or Mutual Respect?

In Islamic tradition, women need to seek their husbands' (or if unmarried, their fathers') permission to go out for work or other activities. This requirement is rooted in the broader principles of family dynamics, marital responsibilities, and gender roles as interpreted from the Quran and Hadiths. It is not surprising to see criticism of this tradition, arguing that it perpetuates gender inequality and limits women's rights to choose. Critics assert that requiring a wife's permission to work violates basic principles of individual freedom and gender equality, which are core values in many non-Muslim democratic countries. The necessity for women to ask for men's permission to work, in Western eyes, can become another proof reifying the perceived backwardness of Islam.

Due to the complexity and vagueness of the Quran in Classical Arabic, its English translation opens up room for distinctive interpretation and controversy regarding Quranic gender relations. The explanation for why wives need their husbands' permission to work outside the household has yet to reach a consensus in the Islamic community. Some authoritative interpretations of the Quran regarding the husband-and-wife relationship may consolidate the criticism of this tradition.

Conservative theologians such as Maudoodi (1958) translate the first section of 4:34 of the Quran[4] as implying that God created men superior to women, legitimizing men's authority in deciding women's affairs. Contrary to such a translation inferring an absolute gender hierarchy between men and women, Aziza al-Hibri (1982) insists that the Quran provides moral guidance for men to be caring. There are more scholars who speak against

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[4] The discussion on the section of 4:34 is partially excerpted and paraphrased from the book by Syed Mohammed Ali, Chapter 6 The Position of Husband and Wife in Islamic Law, p.49-52

the androcentric interpretation of the Quran, which helped establish the power structure favoring men in Muslim communities. For instance, Saiyyid Qutb (1980) and Parvez (1979) suggest that men's Quranic positionality as maintainers of women's affairs does not validate men's superiority. This is based on the principle of reciprocity, where women yield a certain degree of discretion because of men's role as providers for women and the family. Parvez believes that the husband-wife relationship is one of camaraderie, helping manage affairs for a better living. Sisters in Islam (2022) also emphasize that the core of marriage is mutual respect; the rights granted in marriage do not imply ownership and will remain with the individual unless explicitly given.

Given the medley of interpretations of Quran, working Malay women's collective viewpoint is a mixture of the understandings that exemplify marital respect instead of men's absolute authority over women. All my interlocutors do not see a problem with that; rather, they believe it is necessary for women to communicate with their husbands/fathers before seeking a job. Nazir described process for a woman to ask for permission before starting a career,

> *"Let's say she wants to go out and she is married. The communication between the husband and the wife needs to be there. If the husband is willing to give the wife permission to go out to pursue her career, then she can go. But the final say, of course, to the head of the house. [If] the head of the house is a father (meaning that she is not married), she needs first to ask her father whether she can work outside. If the father says yes, then she can go out."*

Nazir explained the Islamic epistemology of gender behind asking for permissions and strategies, "because in Islam, women are supposed to be taken care of [until they are]

mature. But if the woman says no, I want to try to do it on my own. I want to explore because I want to gain more knowledge and thing, [it is okay. Because] in Islam, you can go outside, but with the permission of the head of the family first. So, if you can make a good argument of that to the head of the family, you can go."

Javana recalled that negotiating her decision to work with her husband was smooth and easy, thanks to his wholehearted trust and support. Her father, approaching 60 and suffering from a severe bone injury, was unable to work. As the eldest child, Javana felt a strong responsibility to support her family without placing additional financial burdens on her husband, who already covered all expenses for their own household. "So, my husband said, okay, you work and you use your own money to help your parents because he wants to raise our daughter and he wants to complete our small family. If I want to help my parents, I have to work." Javana's persuasion of her father was to show her plan for getting married: "When I was single, I told my father that I needed my own money because I wanted to get married after finishing my studies. I needed money for the wedding ceremony. I explained to my father that he wouldn't have enough money if he was the only one working. Let me work." Her stories underline the importance of marriage and how her father acknowledged the financial preparations for the wedding as a shared responsibility. As Javana presented, Islam delineates gender roles in terms of differences. Men are responsible for providing for their children and wives, while women's responsibilities include managing the household, educating children, and handling chores and finances. This traditional view of the heterosexual family as the fundamental unit of society, with significant religious importance, is still widely upheld and regulated across various institutions in Malaysia (Koh & Ho, 2009).

Nazir's approach to persuasion is by arguing women's capacity to pursue a career and receive an education, and characterizing women's exposure to the outside world as a win-win situation for both individual and Muslim community: "because there are a lot of scholars that are well known and who are women, who write a lot of books, who are so wealthy. Yet all the wealth, all the knowledge will turn back for the religion itself to teach the kids, to teach the community, to bring out more knowledgeable young generations [who can be] more exposed [and] to be more open-minded in terms of chasing knowledge in this world because knowledge is huge, enormous and wide." In other words, educational and professional training for women are investments that benefit everyone because when women are empowered, the whole Muslim community benefits in the long run. From an individualist point of view, it may be problematic to use the logic of favoring the collective to convince the man who holds religious power to ease restrictions. Although I do not intend to defend the invisible structural inequality underlying women's subordinate status—since women alone are not typically responsible for their own education—I emphasize that criticism should not precede the following examples and arguments.

In fact, traditional gender roles are often challenged in various aspects of reality. Ayu's experience adds nuance to the understanding of gender roles in Malaysian society. She did not face obstacles in obtaining her father's permission to work because she was expected to excel professionally. "My father always ingrained in all my siblings, especially the daughters, that you have to succeed in life, whether as a lawyer or in any profession. My first degree was in law, so it was already expected of me to become a great lawyer. I didn't need their permission." Ayu believes that her father's equal expectations for all his children stemmed from their deep religious background. "I was sent to an Islamic childcare center,

and my father comes from a religious background. His father was a religious teacher, but we were always taught that you must earn your own way. You have to work for yourself and succeed."

Alina noted, "The wife can work if the husband permits her to work. But the income that the wife earns belongs to the wife. The husband will provide for basic necessities and so on. But if the wife also wants to contribute to the family, it depends on the wife." This means that it is the wife's choice whether to use her earnings to support the family, which can disrupt the social and religious expectations placed on men. Hiyam also observed that financial difficulties influence the decision for both husband and wife to work. She stated, "Most traditional men wouldn't let their wives work because they'll be the provider for their household. But in this economy, I guess it's hard to just let the husband work. So, that's why both the husband and wife must work." In this context, the process of negotiating a husband's permission for his wife to work can signify a broader negotiation and disruption of fixed gender roles, where men are expected to be the breadwinners and women to stay at home. Although these discussions occur privately between the couple, the ripple effects extend beyond their agreement, challenging and potentially reshaping societal and religious norms.

Javana made a connection with globalization and Malay women’s growing awareness of the financial risk of dependency on a husband’s single income. She believes it is a modern idea introduced in Malay communities that men are not always trustworthy. Malay women’s exposure to the modern idea consequently disturbs the traditional Muslim operation of a household in which women do not have to work outside. Malay women started seeking jobs to protect themselves. “It's because of the modernization,” Javana said,

"we can't 100% put the trust to our husband. In Malaysia, there's a lot of cheating in relationships." When I was chatting with Javana, she was riding in a car with her husband. Without any worry that such claims might bring up conflicts between her and her husband, she expressed the assertions with confidence and determination of being financially independent. She vividly described the potential plights a woman may face if cheating happened to her, regardless of her religious or ethnic background: "If Malay or Chinese or Indian women didn't go for work, there will be a problem for them if they've been left behind because there's a lot of cheaters, betrayers in relationships. All the women need to have our own money to raise our children, to raise our child." Javana argued that as an inseparable aspect of globalization, modernization reminds women of the wisdom to prepare for the worst situation in a marriage. "I think because of the modernization, all the women in Malaysia already have put in our mind that, oh, what's going to happen if someday my husband leaves me? How can I live if I'm not independent? I have to be independent." For her, a job gives her leverage to combat the risks in marriage. Javana also emphasized her observation of increasing numbers of Malay women entering the job market, doing all types of work: "The Malay women in Malaysia are independent. I can tell you that we are independent now. I think from 100%, around 60% are working. In Malaysia, we have woman lorry drivers, woman drivers for bus. So, for now, I think Malay girls or Malay women or Muslim women in Malaysia, most of them are working."

Javana's response proposes a practical feminine predicament and the collective awareness of it shared by believers and non-believers, inside and outside the Malay community. The conscious commonality prompts Malay women to reexamine the old-fashioned modeling of gender roles in marriage and in public sphere. Due to different levels

of exposure to modern thoughts, there is a dissonance in whether Muslim women should step into the workplace between Malay women from cities and villages and generations, as Hiyam recognized: “We used to be traditional. As a woman, you have to cook for your husband, wash the dishes, do all the house chores. But then, especially youngsters, they would say [to their husbands that] you have to do it together.” Hiyam notices a greater tendency among young Malay women to ask husbands to share 'feminine domestic work': “There's a lot of opinions about it. But the majority said that you have to do cooking together, you have to wash dishes together with your husband. I would say that back then, women didn't want to work because the husband would be the sole provider. But now, they are more open to work, because they want to find their own income in case anything happens, in case their husband divorces them or something.” Hiyam pointed out that such a belief is more prevalent in urban areas: “Muslim women now are more open towards [working]. But I would say that these women, they came from cities, but those women from the villages and the outskirts of town, they won't think about this that much.” According to Hiyam, the idea that a woman’s ultimate destiny is to be a housewife is objected to by many urban Malay women nowadays.

To better understand the necessity of request for permission for working Malay women requires a grasp of Islamic cosmology. In addition to their reasoning, observation, and challenge to traditional gender divisions in the negotiation process within the family, Nazir explained why Muslim women should ask: "In my religion, he will be the one who carries our sins for a daughter who is not yet married. So, he will be responsible for the sins that I make." For Nazir, asking for her father's permission to work is an act of mindfulness and respect because her father will bear the risks associated with potential sins that might occur

outside the household. Yuna shares a similar sentiment, believing that seeking approval from the head of the family before working demonstrates mutual respect. She feels her husband has the right to be informed if she wants to work, acknowledging the increased possibility of misconduct in the workplace. On one hand, this gesture is not only a sign of respect for the “sin carrier”, but also a necessity to solidify one's Muslim identity and to cultivate oneself as a pious subject. It is assigned new meaning that transcends the very appearance of surrendering to male dominance — an embodiment of cherishing and respecting kinship under the Islamic worldview, as well as fulfilling the need for self-moral cultivation and Islamic obligations.

Indeed, it is inevitable to consider the connotations of "the head of family's permission," which seemingly suggest a hierarchy within the family and the possibility of rejection. Islam is not rigid and dead; nor are the knowledge and ideologies circulated among *ummah* (community of believers) stale and homogeneous. Perspectives are individuated in diverse ways and are deeply associated with one's social, economic, and cultural milieu. For working Malay women who live in urban areas, such an act does not imply their subordination in the household, nor prioritize their husbands because of their power in wives' affairs. It has gone beyond a simple act of asking: Malay women’s varied interpretations of it and negotiation in the process reflect their agency in constantly seeking a dynamic balance between husband and wife, family and career, religious beliefs and lived reality, tradition and modernity, or in a more complicated interplay among these elements. Ayu brought up an issue that she believes all Muslims of this era need to consider: “I think as we've become more intertwined, as the world becomes more borderless, we see that we are at the crossroads between becoming modern and becoming more religious. We are at

that juncture where we are trying to combine modern thinking and religious thinking, and where do we go to reach that consensus. We are at the crossroad where we balance between being a good Muslim and achieving success." Her reflection precisely discerns a common goal behind Malay women's navigation of gender relations and dynamics in various aspects of life, along with Malaysia's undertaking integration into globalized modernization.

Therefore, the action of seeking permission as a part of exploring balance should not be reduced to an incomprehensive translation as Malay women's surrender to oppression. Though the implication of acts of asking for agreement highlights an inseparable relationship between bodily performatives and discursive power, as argued by Judith Butler (1997), the power of bodily performatives includes the "significance whose disruptive potential lies in the indeterminate character of signs" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 165). In other words, asking for permission fails to disrupt the well-determined normativity but reinforces it. Nevertheless, Mahmood doubts the universality of this "theory of significance" for its incapability to fully grasp the form of bodily performatives (in this case, asking for 'the head of family's' permission to work) that, "while efficacious in behavior, do not lend themselves easily to representation, elucidation, and a logic of signs and symbols" (p. 165-166). Clearly, Malay women's intention to request approval to work does not align with its apparent significance, which upholds men's superiority.

The process of seeking permission serves as a significant locus for Malay women to negotiate and blur traditional gender roles with their husbands and fathers. It provides opportunities for women to initiate discussions and assert their objectives inside and outside the household respectfully. This process allows them to express their determination

for self-improvement, demonstrate commitment to the faith and the Muslim community, and showcase their knowledge about surroundings. Therefore, this behavior is imbued with new meaning by working Malay women, as their purpose for asking may not entirely align with its conventional Islamic purpose or its apparent significance. They do not view it as a representation of the head of the family's absolute control over women's affairs but rather as a tool and opportunity to seriously express their desires and announce their independence. From this perspective, this act should be understood as a complex and nuanced behavior that reflects the evolving subjectivity of working Malay women throughout the procedure.

It is also worth noting that all informants mentioned the concepts of "limitation," "boundary," and "responsibility" as working Muslim women in both private and public spheres. These considerations may help us gain a sense of the religious significance of asking for permission to work for Malay women. For instance, besides dress codes mentioned by Hiyam and Yuna, the limitation in the workplace for Alina means "not doing anything that is illegal in Islam, for example, drinking alcohol." Javana emphasized her role as a wife and remembered her initial intention to work: "If I have to work with a guy, I know I'm a wife. So, there must be a boundary because my partner is also a husband to his wife. Also, we have to know our intention to work. If you want to work for money and for your family, then you will know your limit between you and your co-workers or your colleagues." To Nazir, it is important to stay pious: "You're trying to be pious as much as you can to please the creator. The creator knows your limitation. The creator knows your situation. The creator hears. The creator sees."

Regarding the maintenance of marital balance unique to Muslim families, Ayu shared her perspective as a mother, wife, and career woman who needs to be trustworthy in both

scenarios and how these identities share responsibilities that grant Muslim women equally important positions in Islam,

"You see, there is no discrimination in Islam about women's rights or the male's rights, because I know that the western countries or non-believers or non-Muslims say that women are oppressed, that we don't have any rights, but as a modern Malay Muslim, I see that there's always a position for a woman in Islam, because all of us comes with a specific responsibility. In Islam, it's the responsibility of the male to provide for their family, and it's the responsibility of female to have children and to educate your children, but in order for you to educate your children, then you have to be educated yourself. That's why I see that everyone has their own roles in Islam. A father has a role, a woman has a role as a mother, and also Islam does not come with, does not say that you cannot work.

You can work, but you also have a certain responsibility to fulfill. For example, my husband allowed me to work, but I must not forget my responsibility at home as well, and the same goes to my husband. He can work, he has to work because he has to provide for the family. He pays for everything. My pay is only for myself and the things that I wanted to do and just to help a little bit with my husband's household expenses. So, that's how Islam provides for the role of everyone. It does not say that women cannot go to work, and women cannot be the decision makers, but in my household, every decision is made together.

In Islam, if you do go to work or in whatever roles that you have been entrusted upon, whether you are a housewife, whether you are a career woman, there are always things that you need to be mindful of. You have to be amanah, which means that you

have to be trustworthy and you have to be on time. You have to be mindful of each other."

Cultivation of Islamic Virtues

In Mahmood's work, she uses the example of Egypt Muslim women's cultivation of patience *(sabar) and* shyness *(al-haya),* the Islamic virtues, to argue that theorizing agency should not exclude the form of "capacity to endure, persist, and suffer" (2001). Mahmood's theorization of agency also applies to working Malay women with their intentions to grow inwardly. Among the responses, a noticeable pattern emphasizes the importance of cultivating Islamic virtues in the face of hardship and unexpected situations. This cultivation aims at applying and enhancing their spiritual intelligence, a religious knowledge that can guide them through challenges. In this context, spiritual intelligence refers to a continuous commitment to actions and beliefs that adhere to Islamic teachings, serving as a practice of one's faith in Allah (Nik Mat et al., 2022). It is clear from the responses of the informants that patience is important in their understanding of practicing piety.

According to Islamic epistemology, patience does not merely mean suppressing impulses and waiting permissively, nor does it refer to "a form of passiveness and stagnation in dealing with something," but implies one's subjectivity of being "active and progressive in its defensive form of surviving trials from Allah" (Kuswaya & Ma'mun, 2020). In exercising patience, especially in the face of uncertainty, the demand for a firm belief in Allah increases, thereby deepening the individual's connection with Allah. Yuna described how she practiced patience, demonstrating her steadfast faith in Allah when she

had no clues for her future career: "I need to quit from the previous company because something happened. At that time, I had no backup at all. I had no work offered, and I felt horrible." Yuna emphasized the trust in Allah and her understanding of the situation as a trial given by Allah: "But then, I tried to remember [that] we have to trust Allah, the faith that Allah gives us. Sometimes he tests us. So, at that time, I just tried to read the Al-Qur'an and the meanings and tried to adapt [it] in my life and my feelings. Just hold on."

In addition to strengthening the bonds between an individual and Allah, patience is deemed a necessary mentality that improves one's mental and spiritual competence. Resonating with Mahmood's idea (2001) that agency entails not only acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability derived from the virtue of *sabr* in Islam, working Malay women view the cultivation of patience as granting their adaptability to various hurdles in everyday life, such as the conflicts between personal affairs and Islamic practices. The practice of patience reflects the mentality of resilient fighters who endure and stay consistent. Hiyam recalled how her inner peace and calmness were built when she stuck to the Islamic guidance of patience in the face of challenges in her written response to my follow-up query about how Islam helped her overcome difficulties in the workplace: "When I encounter challenges in the workplace, my religion helps me face them by providing me with a sense of inner peace." Her response shows an unbreakable tie between Islam and the desires for inward spiritual growth and a stronger mentality: "I will look at the bright side because Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity (Quran 2:286) and with hardship comes ease (Quran 94:6). There are a lot of times whenever I face challenges, I will first be patient

and seek help from Allah through prayer. After praying, my heart will be at ease as I have expressed my concerns as he is always near to those who call upon him."

The practice of prayer is a bodily act associated with the construction of patience. As Hiyam suggests, one of the embodiments of exercising patience is to pray. In Islamic teaching, to assist humans in coping with their various problems, Allah commands them to pray, in addition to being patient (Solihin et al., 2022). Nazir believes praying is an act of being patient in its essence, especially during work time. Praying itself raises awareness of a human's imperfections and can be helpful in combating defects in the humanities and maintaining the relationship with Allah. "We have to pray five times a day. Those also require patience, right? [Even] when you are in the middle of something that is very important to you, you have to stop for a prayer that [shows you] remember your God, remember who's your creator. Remember who is the one that provides you sustenance and with that during your calamities, and when the calamity strikes who is really there;" Pinpointing the benefits of praying, Nazir concluded, "so that [helps to] develop my identity as well to be nice to each other and to be patient, because sometimes in life we don't always get things that we want, right?"

Parallel to the act of veiling, praying as an action can create feelings, desires, and mentalities. Mahmood (2005, p.157) contends that it would be criticized in some liberal ideologies of the self "where a dissonance between internal feelings and external expressions would be considered a form of dishonesty or self-betrayal." She argues that the absence of shyness that can be cultivated through the practice of veiling and acting shy is "a marker of an incomplete learning process" (Mahmood, 2005, p.157). Praying during work or in daily routines also serves as a bridge to resolve the discrepancy between what

God demands and the presently incomplete status. The understanding of developing patience here is not limited to the "capacity to persist, suffer, and endure," though it does require one to bear and withstand. Clearly, exercising patience or praying underline agency in taking actions that demonstrate their commitment to not only fostering human-divine connections but also refining personalities and mentalities believed to benefit their well-being.

The inherent gendered fairness of Islam, as the informants firmly believed, is vividly reflected in their responses. On that basis, they apply Islamic beliefs to counter difficulties through patience, adaptability, and continuous self-improvement. These themes of personal and professional development are common to both genders. Nazir shares how these Islamic principles guide her through the hardships during work:

> *"Islam encourages anyone, anybody, for male and or female to develop themselves, their skills and be better every day. It doesn't only focus on male or on females… [Islam] helped me in terms of being patient. As a person, we always assume we do right all the time, but suddenly, all the energy you've put into a work that you did and your boss didn't agree with is thrown away. It's not appreciated as much as you think it should be. [At] that time, religions really helped me see in another perspective. I can see as not everything's perfect for you, it's perfect, but for everyone, [or] for another human being, it's not perfect. So you have to be patient. Most of the time, it helped me in being patient and to listen more than to argue because he is in a position of pressure, so we have to understand his position and responsibility is huge. Sometimes there are words that are not acceptable for you, but religion teaches me to be patient and sort it out clearly."*

Another lesson Nazir learned from Islam is to examine obstacles from a broader perspective rather than her own point of view to thrive in various aspects, such as cultivating professionalism for work and a flexible mentality for life. Her frustration at the beginning of the unpleasant interaction with her boss eased when she tried to apply the perspective that Islam teaches her. God requires everyone to achieve their best, while it is understandable that humans cannot be perfect in handling pressures throughout the process. What is more crucial for everyone in the workplace is to wisely solve pressures together. "Because what he did was to bring out [work in high quality]. So, the same goes for me. My religion encourages us [both] females and males to be better every day. I'm not saying that being harsh is good…sometimes it is acceptable, but always find a way to recover the tension." As Nazir's narrative suggests, religiosity is inseparable from her subjectivity in understanding situations and deciding on appropriate solutions. Religion plays an important role in facilitating her achievement in both spirituality and materiality.

Ayu's response resonates with Nazir: "I work as if I'm going to die tomorrow and strive for the concept of *falah* in Islam. *Falah* means winning in Islam. *Falah* [is] for my spiritual self and also my personal achievement." She highlighted that personal achievement is not limited to capital accumulation and socio-political status within the power structures but includes spiritual maturity. "My motivation has become towards spiritual journeys other than material journeys. So, those things have become less important," Ayu insists. In the process of shifting focus from materiality to spirituality, where her agency and subjectivity were prominently incorporated, Ayu achieved a greater sense of satisfaction as her spirituality and piety were enriched through internal growth.

In working Malay women's journey to cultivate Islamic virtues, their agency lies in exploring the inner selves and building resilience to face the problems in the private space. These are not the same as those in the public space, where the course of events and the outcomes are determined by God. These problems and trials, in their view, can only be mitigated and resolved primarily through self-exploration, cultivation of piety, and constructing a deeper connection with God. In other words, their agency is much more visible also more difficult to detect when they are facing the inner problems, because it does not externalize as an outward confrontation, but an inward self-confrontation. Their subjectivity also lies in determination of cultivating piety to combat human shortcomings, thereby achieving inner peace and harmony.

Conclusion

In this research, two major characteristics of working Malay women's agency and subjectivity stand out in terms of navigating gender relations in urban Malaysia. Firstly, their perception of the environment, which forms the basis of their agency, cannot be understood without reference to Islamic cosmology, which holds that God makes the best decisions regarding the course of fate. However, this belief does not negate working Malay women's agentive capability to make sense of and respond to complex realities believed to be beyond individual control. In fact, the belief that ultimate fate is determined by God strengthens their determination to take action, as the controllable efforts made during the process outweigh the uncontrollable outcome. Regarding the navigation of gender relations, based on the perception that Islam is equal for both genders, though their fates and roles may differ, working Malay women act wisely to assert their presence in discourse and

facilitate equal and respectful communication with each other. Their expression of opinions and apprehension of an equal working environment manifest a mutually constructive relationship between reality and subjectivity. By presumptively claiming equal status in gender relations, despite potential discrepancies between perceptions and reality, they help to disrupt undiscerned gender discrimination. In addition, their agency also plays a decisive role in forming the pious subjectivity. They consider the basic daily prayers and the prayers performed in times of difficulty as similarly crucial for cultivating a connection with God and a sense of His presence because this practice is seen as an important part of developing Islamic virtues such as patience. By nurturing these virtues, they can face inner struggles with greater equanimity. This inner cultivation is independent of God's control and relies on the individual's efforts and attempts.

Secondly, working Malay women’s agency embodies a blend of Islamic teachings and modern ideas in exploring gender relations in private and public spaces in contemporary Malaysia, while simultaneously adhering to basic Islamic principles. Working Malay women actively explore the integration of Islam and modernization, indicating their belief that Muslim identity is not incompatible with being modern global citizens. Their interpretation of Islamic tenets, such as seeking the head of the family's permission to work, imply an internalization of women's inferiority. Instead, it is viewed as a virtue demonstrating kindness and care for the family, an obligation that a Muslim must fulfill. Additionally, it serves as a crucial locus for Malay women to assert their independence, negotiate gender roles, and blur labor divisions within the household. A reductionist reading of such gestures as embodied docility and a failure to resist not only victimizes and objectifies working Muslim women but also ignores their pious subjectivity that shapes

every aspect of life.

Overall, it is difficult to formulate an overarching theory of working Malay women's agency given the multiple meanings, effects, and moves embodied in their actions and choices in different scenarios. However, it is certain that their agency and narratives "should be analyzed in terms of the particular field of arguments it has made available to Muslim women and the possibilities for action these arguments have opened and foreclosed for them" (Mahmood, 2005, p.183). Their agency is integral to their religious, cultural, and socially constructed subjectivity and should not be examined in a vacuum or in a context that removes the particularity of individual and regional characteristics.

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