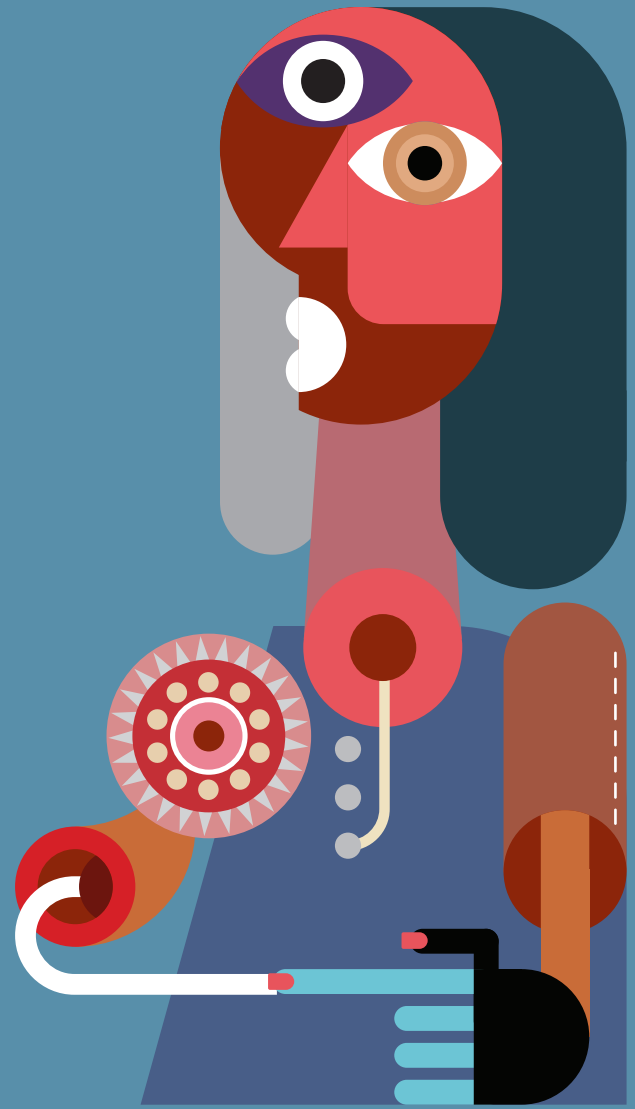


EMPOWER



# PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA

UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENA THROUGH A GENDER LENS

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# **CHAPTER 1: THE NEXUS BETWEEN VIOLENT EXTREMISM, GENDER AND THE INTERNET**

The world today is choked with fear and devastation by the spread of extremist ideologies and the ever more frequent violent attacks. A survey conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a non-profit organisation based in Washington D.C. shows that “people are willing to try just about anything to stop the bloodshed: from military action to stronger border controls and mandatory identification cards to relinquishing privacy and accepting constraints on speech”.<sup>1</sup> This fear of violent extremism operates like an ever shape-shifting grey cloud over and above us, reinforced by a growing sense of helplessness. Violent extremism in all forms are constantly disrupting the peace in our society, creating and deepening political divisions and fuelling prejudices against people. These divisions and prejudices are sometimes misdirected and wrongly target already vulnerable and marginalised populations.

While much of media’s attention has been on acts of systemic terrorism by groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, violent extremism is not only limited to these groups, or to one particular religion, or to a particular geography. The “face” of violent extremism takes many forms and constantly evolves, depending on who the audience is and how much power perpetrators of violent extremism hold. In a world that can no longer do without digital technology, violent extremism plays out in both our physical world and on the internet. Both State and non-State actors acknowledge that the internet has become a fertile ground that nurtures the growth of violent extremism. Violent extremism can grow through the spread of propaganda, recruitment of individuals susceptible to propagandas, raising of funds and by communicating with like-minded persons through encrypted platforms.<sup>2</sup>

1 Shannon N. Green & Keith Proctor, *Turning Point: A New Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism*, (Washington, USA: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, November 2016), iv, [https://csis-ilab.github.io/cve/report/Turning\\_Point.pdf](https://csis-ilab.github.io/cve/report/Turning_Point.pdf)

2 United Nations-Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force. *First report of the working group on radicalisation and extremism that lead to terrorism: Inventory of state programmes*. (New York: United Nations, 2008), <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=10129>

Around the globe, policy makers, inter-governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, technology companies and academics have invested considerable efforts into examining the root cause of violent extremism and in how to counter and prevent the growth of the movement. The Malaysian government, as with most governments, has deployed a hard-power approach in combating violent extremism. The then Prime Minister, Najib Razak, has said that Malaysia’s preventive laws are powerful and effective weapons in combating violent extremism and preventing possible incidents of violence.<sup>3</sup>

Not discounting the importance of hard-power approaches, it is important to bear in mind that an extremist does not suddenly become one out of nowhere, nor are such inclinations towards violent extremism caused by a single grievance. The same report by CSIS notes that “modern extremists’ world view did not just appear out of the blue. It has been deliberately cultivated and spread for many decades”.<sup>4</sup> One has to be deliberately cultivated as to be so intolerant towards any worldview that is different from theirs to the point where violence is justifiable as the primary medium of exchange and a means to an end. It starts from home, where we least expect it to be. The report further states:-

Structural conditions, including real and perceived marginalization, grievances, and experiences of injustice or corruption, may push individuals into joining a violent extremist organization, while radical recruitment narratives, propaganda, and social ties to extremist networks work to pull them in. Psychological factors, such as impulsive, thrill-seeking behavior or a desire to exact revenge or right perceived wrongs, are also thought to play a role in the radicalization process.<sup>5</sup>

3 “Preventive laws powerful weapon to counter violent extremism, says PM”, *The Malay Mail Online*, 17 March 2018, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1600953/preventive-laws-powerful-weapon-to-counter-violent-extremism-says-pm>

4 Shannon N. Green & Keith Proctor, *Turning Point: A New Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism*,<sup>3</sup>

5 Ibid, 14

Violent extremism is played out in our everyday lives across different platforms, at a range of intensity, and by different actors. It starts with online bullying against a woman's decision to not don a hijab; a group Facebook page threatening to spray aerosol paint on women found to be "inappropriately dressed";<sup>6</sup> and numerous death threats made towards a group of self-identified atheists on Facebook.<sup>7</sup>

In most instances of online violence, women are disproportionately targeted. Extremism in all forms affects the rights of women, especially on their rights to freedom of expressions and public participation. More so, such forms of extremism risk being normalised in our society and often slip under the radar of authorities and civil society organisations.

This research argues that violent extremism cannot be fully understood without examining the nexus between violent extremism and incidents of online sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Extremism has been suffered by women and gender non-conforming persons throughout their lives. For example, women who are neither allowed to leave their homes nor meet anyone outside of the home and experience domestic violence, experience a particular form of extremism in the household. With the proliferation of internet connectivity and the use of social media, the extremist tendencies in order to put women in their place have significantly shown how the social media platforms and incidents of online SGBV among other variables, are bringing people to the negative extremes of the political spectrum and toward violent extremism.

## **1.1 VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA**

### **1.1.1 DEFINING VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

The discourse around violent extremism is often conflated with acts of terrorism and inevitably, overtaken by a sense of crisis and seen as a matter of national security—a matter to be addressed by the government. In the absence of an internationally and universally accepted definition for violent extremism, the framing of violent extremism remains

ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> This inexact terminology points to an important concern—it covers an agenda that is inexact, mixes of legitimate and illegitimate concerns, disregarding legitimate threats that are not within the mainstream discourse, and conflates different levels and types of risks.

While there is certainly an interdependent link between violent extremism and terrorism, they are not the same in terms of phenomena. Violent extremism is defined as "an ideology that accepts the use of violence for the pursuit of goals that are generally social, racial, religious and/or political in nature";<sup>9</sup> where terrorism is "solely the act of violence carried out in pursuit of these goals".<sup>10</sup>

Demarcating the definition for violent extremism and terrorism is paramount. Violent extremism is purely an ideology, though it is a predominant feature of terrorist behaviour, it is an "ideology or a viewpoint" that does not necessarily "reach the threshold for an act of terrorism".<sup>11</sup> If violent extremism is combated in the same manner as terrorism or physical acts of terror, as opposed to working with the communities and countering the ideologies that justify the use of violence, any efforts to eliminate violent extremism would likely be futile.

### **1.1.2 THE (OBVIOUSLY) MISSING LENS TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

In early 2018, a video featuring a group of men intimidating and harassing participants of a women's march in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was distributed on Facebook. The video shows the men chasing after the participants while shouting stridently from across the street, "This is not a liberal country", "LGBT<sup>12</sup> have no rights", "Women ha[ve] no rights in this country". The entire incident happened right in front of one of the main police stations in the city which has at least one or more dedicated sentries. The video was recorded by one of the men and was later uploaded to their

6 Ashley Tan, "Thaipusam group out to spray paint 'inappropriately dressed' women", *The Star Online*, 9 January 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/01/09/group-out-to-spray-paint-on-women-in-inappropriate-sarees-during-thaipusam/>

7 Atheist Republic Facebook Group, accessed 3 April 2018 <https://web.facebook.com/AtheistRepublic/posts/1500361950050659>

8 Jason-Leigh Striegher, "Violent-extremism: An examination of a definitional dilemma", in the 8th Australian Security and Intelligence Conference, (pp. 75-86), (Perth, WA: Edith Cowan University Joondalup Campus, 2015), doi: 10.4225/75/57a945ddd3352

9 Ibid, 79

10 Ibid, 75

11 Mahan & Griset 2013; Southers 2013, 4, as cited in Striegher 2015

12 Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.



Facebook page, along with a picture of the police report they had made against the women's march.<sup>13</sup>

One of the respondents in this research expressed that, "When I saw that video I was angry, the narrative that has been pushed by [the] State about queer folks has become action [is now being acted upon], I was angry, and it took a couple of days before it really sunk that I am not allowed in this country". The video has several layers to it—the antithesis towards *liberalism* in Malaysia, denial of women's public participation, reprisals towards people who self-identify as LGBT, and most jarringly, a justified righteous political rage and entitled supremacist attitude that led to such blatant violence. The men in the video held an unchallenged moral authority over women and LGBT people, and were convinced that their position is backed by the State. Despite police reports made by the victims, to-date, no action has been taken against the identifiable perpetrators.

In other incidents, British-based singer Dua Lipa was pressured to edit the word '*babi*'<sup>14</sup> on her social media post after being mocked by Malaysian netizens;<sup>15</sup> gymnast Farah Ann was criticised and slammed on social media for wearing a leotard, the official gymnast attire, but which purportedly revealed the shape of her *aurat*, in this case "her vagina". The disproportionate and illogical response took place online despite her winning six medals in the 2015's Southeast Asian (SEA) Games.<sup>16</sup> The worsening environment for women in Malaysia can also be assessed from how even members of Parliament and members of the G25, a progressive group of former civil servants of Malaysia who are Malay Muslims, can be personally and physically attacked when they take

a vocal stand on gender equality.<sup>17</sup>

All the above-mentioned incidents, including the case studies compiled in this research, reflect a growing intolerance over women's agency resultant from an extremist, supremacist and misogynist stance that appear to be against the promotion of gender equality.

Organisations involved in countering violent extremism have also long noted the notion that young men fuel the rise of extremist groups. Ezekilov, J. (2017) says:

The multifaceted ways violent terrorist groups come to exist, operate, and flourish are rooted in complex geopolitical trends, which are continuously researched and debated by national security experts, policymakers, and development practitioners alike... one major commonality among extremist groups is that they actively identify and recruit young, disillusioned men as fighters on their front lines. The ubiquity of this strategy suggests there is an inherent lure for young men to join such groups, one that goes beyond the groups' respective ideologies.<sup>18</sup>

Michael Kimmel, in an article to The Guardian, a British-based media, highlights that while the lure of violent extremism is resultant from a host of structural variables including economic displacement, the threats to domestic patriarchy,<sup>19</sup> and political marginalisation, it cannot be fully understood without adopting a gender lens. He further notes that:

There is a gendered political psychology of extremism: that the men who join do experience the need for camaraderie

13 Juana Jaafar (@juanaaafar), comment on the attack on participants of Women's March, Twitter, 10 March 2018, <https://twitter.com/juanaaafar/status/972697183102255104>

14 *Babi* means pig in Bahasa Malaysia, an animal that is *haram* in Islam; and the same word means father in Albanian which was reported to be Dua Lipa's parents' native language.

15 Jordan Barnes, "Dua Lipa edits Insta post over 'babi' row", The Malay Mail Online, 6 March 2018, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/dua-lipa-edits-insta-post-over-babi-row>

16 Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, "Muslim gymnast Farah Ann Abdul Hadi criticised for 'revealing' leotard worn in double-gold win - but her supporters are out in force", *Independent*, 17 June 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/muslim-gymnast-farah-ann-abdul-hadi-criticised-for-revealing-leotard-worn-in-double-gold-win-but-her-10325444.html>

17 A social media user had posted a picture of Minister Azalina Othman Said with the caption, "*Tiada seorang pun sanggup nak rogol saya* (Translation: Nobody is willing to rape me)" on his Facebook page. This was believed to be in response to the Minister's statement that a rapist of a minor will not be exonerated from the crime even if the rapist married the victim. Read more at: <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/04/233791/azalina-lodges-police-report-against-fake-crude-fb-post> and also JAG's statement to the media

18 Jossif Ezekilov, *Gender "Men-Streaming" CVE: Countering Violence Extremism By Addressing Masculinities Issues. Reconsidering Development*, 5(1), George Washington University, <https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/reconsidering/article/view/908>

19 wives working, children getting an education that circumvents paternal authority

and community; the threats to a solid, grounded identity; the desire for a life of meaning and purpose; and the inability or obstacles to achieving that life as specifically gendered feelings, urges and emotion.<sup>20</sup>

A 2015 UN Women’s global study on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 found that “across religions and regions, a common thread shared by extremist groups is that in each and every instance, their advance has been coupled with attacks on the rights of women and girls—rights to education, to public life and to decision-making over their own bodies”.<sup>21</sup>

These hostile actions that target women are often exacerbated along religious and ethnic lines. Research by Riaz Hassan (2008) shows that the kind of Islam practiced in Malaysia is increasingly self-righteous, purist, supremacist and misogynist, and this is not only a phenomenon in PAS-governed states (opposition-ruled) but also UMNO-governed states.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly, moral policing and scrutiny of what is *halal*<sup>23</sup> and what is *haram* have gained tractions in the Malaysian society, both online and offline.

Accordingly, early indicators of violent extremism can be observed in everyday behaviour and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) that affects women.

20 Michael Kimmel, “Almost all violent extremists share one thing: their gender”, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2018, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/violent-extremists-share-one-thing-gender-michael-kimmel?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/violent-extremists-share-one-thing-gender-michael-kimmel?CMP=share_btn_tw)

21 UN Women, Peace and Security Section, “Chapter 9: Countering Violent Extremism While Respecting the Rights and Autonomy of Women and Their Communities”, in *Global Study on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325* (United States: UN Women, 2000) 221-233, [http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20(1).pdf)

22 See Riaz Hassan. 2008. *Inside Muslim Minds*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press for more information. PAS is Parti Islam SeMalaysia, the Islamic political party, in opposition to UMNO. UMNO is the United Malays National Organisation that remains the dominant political party in the coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) and which formed the previous government administration before the 14th General Election in May 2018.

23 The words *halal* and *haram* are the usual terms used in the Quran to designate the categories of lawful or allowed (*halal*) and unlawful or forbidden (*haram*). *Halal* refers to what is permissible or lawful in traditional Islamic law. It is frequently applied to permissible food and drinks. However, in Islamic jurisprudence, this binary opposition was elaborated into a more complex classification known as “the five decisions”: mandatory, recommended, neutral, reprehensible, and forbidden. Islamic jurists disagree on whether the term *halal* covers the first three or the first four of these categories.

Naturally, early responses to such discriminations and abuses are pivotal in preventing any major terrorist and violent attacks. Promoting gender equality is potentially the most effective and powerful response to violence and violent extremism.

## 1.2 ONLINE SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

### 1.2.1 THE INTERNET AS A DEMOCRATIC SPACE

From exercising our rights to freedom of expression and voicing our dissent to the new law on Twitter, to the orthodox task of paying household bills online or googling “how to make *rendang*”, or sharing an “Insta-worthy”<sup>24</sup> picture on Instagram or the news of a personal milestone, the internet has become a political, personal, social, economic, leisure and an everyday space of our being.

According to the Internet Users Survey 2017 from the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the percentage of internet users in 2016 was at 76.9 and non-internet users stood at 23.1 percent, short of quarter of the entire population.<sup>25</sup> Men outnumbered women in the distribution of internet users, with the number of men at 57.4 percent and women at 42.6 percent,<sup>26</sup> bearing in mind that men outnumber women with the sex ratio of 106<sup>27</sup> in the overall national population.<sup>28</sup> A survey by international content delivery network service provider, Akamai ranked Malaysia’s average internet connection speed as the 10th fastest in the Asia Pacific.<sup>29</sup> Based on these statistics, one could say that Malaysians are generally reasonably well-connected to the internet.

24 When a picture is *good* enough to be posted on Instagram. See: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=insta%20worthy>

25 “Internet Users Survey 2017: Statistical Brief Number Twenty-One”, *Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission* (2017): 8. <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/MCMC-Internet-Users-Survey-2017.pdf>

26 “Internet Users Survey 2017”, 29.

27 The sex ratio is the number of males per 100 females.

28 “Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010”, Department of Statistics Malaysia, Official Portal, last modified 7 May 2015, accessed 3 April 2018, <https://goo.gl/3CWgWY>

29 “Malaysia’s internet connection is the Asia-Pacific’s 10th fastest”, *The Sun Daily*, 1 June 2017, <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2017/06/01/malysias-internet-connection-asia-pacifics-10th-fastest>

The internet space in Malaysia has been argued as a “democratic enclave”, where the authoritarian regime is replaced by recognizably democratic norms and procedures (Liu, 2011). The social media campaign by the opposition parties and the rise of independent blogs and online media were often interpreted as one of the main factors for the victory in the 12th and 13th general elections, where the ruling coalition at the time, *Barisan Nasional*, had lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament. The lack of centralised governance of the internet, which is uncharacteristic of the government’s authoritarian treatment of traditional media technology such as print and broadcast, allows for the flourishing of dissenting voices and sets the backdrop for a vibrant social movement.

At an individual level, for those who have access to reliable connectivity, we are given a publicity machinery with a reach and power, which was previously available only to people with power, fame and wealth. It is in this sense that the internet contributes to the balancing of power and the privileging of who speaks. With the internet, suddenly everyone is a writer, commentator, photographer, artist, celebrity, producer, publisher and broadcaster. We measure the significance of our contents and opinions based on the number of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’. Making a political stance on social media has become as simple as changing your profile picture to a rainbow or by sharing an article on feminism. As the individual embraces the liberation that has resulted from a decentralised internet structure, the hyper visibility of our digital presence also renders us vulnerable to social surveillance and policing. Such is the inherent paradox of social media and the internet.

EMPOWER’s 2016 research on freedom of assembly and of association online notes that the internet has “evolved into a medium that encourages polarisation, leading to difficulties in having meaningful discourse and achieving a common ground”.<sup>30</sup> The early optimism of the internet being a panacea of political change is waning. The internet landscape has increased in complexity as new technological development, laws and policies are introduced; and as State and non-State actors with extremist views are reigning the power of the internet to their own agendas.

30 Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER), *Freedom of Assembly and Association Online*, pp. 85, (Selangor, Malaysia: 2016), [https://empowermalaysia.org/isi/uploads/sites/3/APC\\_IMPACT\\_FOAA\\_Malaysia.pdf](https://empowermalaysia.org/isi/uploads/sites/3/APC_IMPACT_FOAA_Malaysia.pdf)

## 1.2.2 INTERNET AS A GENDERED SPACE

The internet is gendered and it reproduces effects of social exclusion and gender-based discriminations from our physical world. Multiple researches have shown that online SGBV happens disproportionately to women and they share the same root causes of SGBV offline. Whether it takes place online or offline, access to justice for victims of SGBV is hampered by a culture of impunity that normalised such forms of violence against women.

Online SGBV is defined as “acts of [sexual and] gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies”.<sup>31</sup> This includes, among others, online stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, death and rape threats, blackmailing, assessing or uploading/disseminating a woman’s intimate photos, videos or audio clips without her consent, and accessing or disseminating a woman’s private data without her consent.

The perpetration of online SGBV is rooted in the persistence of gender-based discrimination in Malaysia’s patriarchal system, and sometimes it oscillates between the digital and the physical. Even with a Domestic Violence Act and the criminalisation of rape and intimidation, Malaysia is yet to be able to adequately address SGBV offline, let alone online. It is the online incidents that pose very specific challenges that require special attention.

However, the internet, despite the occurrences of SGBV has been integral to the women’s rights and feminism movements in Malaysia, as with many other countries. The internet was instrumental to the #MyTransAlly Campaign, a campaign designed to promote tolerance and acceptance towards transgender women and men in Malaysia. Reported in EMPOWER’s 2016 research on freedom of association and of assembly online, it is noted that, “protected by the distance afforded by computer screens and network connections, the transgender community is able to express itself with multimedia and interactive tools that can rapidly distribute content regardless of geographical location”.<sup>32</sup> Distribution of such contents would not have been possible with government-linked traditional media.

31 Association for Progressive Communications (APC), *From Impunity to Justice: Domestic legal remedies for cases of technology-related violence against women*, 2 March 2015, <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/impunity-justice-domestic-legal-remedies-cases-tec>

32 Freedom of Assembly and Association Online, pp. 49

In 2017, joining women around the world, Malaysians too poured out their personal stories of sexual assault and harassment in all industries and spaces on Twittersphere via the #MeToo movement.<sup>33</sup> Two female Malaysian journalists have also come out with stories of sexual harassment by local politicians, including a government minister.<sup>34</sup> The report sparked public outrage and has caught the attention of law enforcers. The hashtag was started by an American actress Alyssa Milano asking people to respond with a simple “me too” if they had been sexually harassed or assaulted. The hashtag has since then trended and became a rallying cry against sexual assault and harassment. Created as a grassroots movement to reach sexual assault survivors, the origins of the #MeToo campaign started way before the predominance of social media.<sup>35</sup> This collective power women and allies built together and organically through #MeToo on social media is not to be underestimated, though they may yet to be translated into actual policy and change in legislation.

As women and gender non-conforming individuals galvanise the power of the internet to speak up and exercise their rights, instances of online SGBV follow. EMPOWER’s report “Voice, Visibility and A Variety of Viciousness” highlighted that 8 out of 15 women have left social media platforms as a result of experiencing or witnessing online sexual and gender-based harassment, effectively denying their rights to freedom of expression and public participation.<sup>36</sup> The same trend is also reflected in a research done by Amnesty International recently, which says,

“The violence and abuse many women experience on Twitter has a detrimental effect on their right to express themselves equally, freely and without fear. Instead of strengthening women’s voices, the violence and abuse many women experience on the platform leads women

to self-censor what they post, limit their interactions, and even drives women off Twitter completely”.<sup>37</sup>

Importantly, women’s rights and gender equality movements must strengthen their resistance against extremist ideologies that seek to perpetrate SGBV online and offline. Hence, examining and understanding the narratives used in instances of online SGBV would help in developing an evidence-based strategy that challenge extremist ideologies and ideas to overtake the market with diverse, alternate narratives that respect and tolerate different worldviews and identities.

### 1.3 CONNECTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND EVERYDAY ONLINE SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Considering the contextual developments described above as a result of the blurring of the demarcation between the physical and digital worlds we live in, this research sought to inquire:

- 1) What is the current understanding of extremist speech and actions in relation to women’s freedom of expression? What forms do these take? What is the role and impact of gender and/or gender inequality, if any?
- 2) What is the current understanding of extremist speech and actions in relation to men’s defence of gender equality? What forms do these take? What is the role and impact of gender and/or gender inequality, if any?
- 3) What type of speech and actions lead to, trigger or impel extremist speech and actions in relation to women’s freedom of expression?
- 4) What type of speech and actions lead to, trigger or impel extremist speech and actions in relation to men’s defence of gender equality?
- 5) What speech and actions are able to counter and if not directly counter, reduce the impact of extremist speech and actions in relation to women’s freedom of expression and men’s defence of gender equality?

33 “Malaysians say #MeToo, share experiences of sexual harassment”, The Malaysian Insight, 17 October 2017, <http://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/18876/>

34 Max Walden, “Malaysia’s #MeToo moment’ sparked by report on sexual harassment of journalists”, Asian Correspondent, 19 January 2018, <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2018/01/malaysias-metoo-moment-sparked-report-sexual-harassment-journalists/#mY8mXCu33IUfHvxc.99>

35 Nadia Khomami, “#MeToo: how a hashtag became a rallying cry against sexual harassment”, The Guardian, 20 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment>

36 Juana Jaafar, “Voice, Visibility and A Variety of Viciousness”, Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER), (Selangor, Malaysia), 2017. [https://empowermalaysia.org/isi/uploads/2017/12/EMPOWER-VVV\\_FINAL\\_Web.pdf](https://empowermalaysia.org/isi/uploads/2017/12/EMPOWER-VVV_FINAL_Web.pdf)

37 Amnesty International, “Toxic Twitter- A Toxic Place for Women”, accessed 26 May 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>

6) How does the prevalence of peace and security in Malaysia correlate with the state/advancement of gender equality in the country? What is the understanding of peace and security then? Socially, politically, economically, technologically? What kind of language was used then that respected, promoted and protected women's freedom of expression and/or gender equality, if any? What was the role and impact of education at the time, if any?

However, as the research and data analysis advanced, these research questions had to be further sharpened.

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# CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is a qualitative research, which adopts an inductive approach in analysing the data in order to answer the research questions. Using case studies developed by identified research respondents, the research also gathered data through interviews with key respondents, and through a desk and literature review. Research data took the form of texts that were both words and pictures. Data was gathered over three months, from February to May 2018. Research respondents were identified on the basis of:-

- a) How vocal and visible the research respondent is in speaking on gender equality, feminist ideas/ideology, and/or women's rights;
- b) The attacks faced for being vocal and visible in speaking on gender equality, feminist ideas/ideology, and/or women's rights.

Because of the inductive approach adopted, the research framework had to be further fine-tuned, and as a result, the research sought to answer the research questions listed below.

## 2.1 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research asks four questions:

- a) What are the languages and practices used to silence women's voices and to erase their visibility online?
- b) How does discourse on gender equality and women's rights interact with the perpetrators of extremist views targeting women?
- c) What are the challenges for women and allies in Malaysia to speak up on gender equality?
- d) How is online sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in all forms enabling violent extremism?

## 2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As earlier alluded to, at the heart of this research are interviews and case study questions with a total of 10 respondents – women, LGBTQ people and allies,<sup>38</sup> who actively advocate for gender equality and speak up against SGBV. The cases collected focus specifically on single incidents of online SGBV encountered by the research respondents, as opposed to the respondents' general experience. These case studies were expected to allow a closer look into the culture and the language used in silencing and shutting down discourse.

A combination of research methods was used in this research, namely interviews, open-ended surveys, discourse analysis on comments and conversations made on social media (mainly Facebook and Twitter), as well as the use of secondary data.

It must be noted that men, too, are targets of online violence and abuses – and their experiences deserve further investigation as well, especially in cases where they stood up against sexism and SGBV. However, various research has shown that the violence men and women receive differs greatly in substance, persistence and quantity. While men receive abuse on account of the views they hold, the comments women receive seem to quickly target their gender identity *as women*.<sup>39</sup>

For the purpose of this research, cases were selected specifically where individual or organization or events were explicitly targeted for speaking up on women's rights and gender equality. The research pays attention to the intersectionality of identity and privileges that may influence the outcome of these attacks, namely gender identity and expression, ethnicity, religion, individual or organisation etc.

<sup>38</sup> Allies are defined as those who do not identified as women but advocates for women's rights or feminism

<sup>39</sup> Anja Kovacs, Richa Kaul Padte and Shobha SV, "'Don't Let it Stand!': An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India", *Internet Democracy Project*, (New Delhi, India: April 2013), pp. 7, <https://internetdemocracy.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf>

Furthermore, the research focuses on the violence faced by respondents in response to their own expression, including verbal abuse, sexual harassment, hate speech, threats, tactics and other multimedia contents. The research was unable to consider other forms of violence, i.e. stalking, doxxing, that may follow an expression.

It follows that the research concentrates on expression made in a relatively public social group. The distinction between the public and the private online is complicated and political. For instance, a private group on Facebook containing 100 indigenous people where not everyone knows everyone; or a private Instagram account with 2,000 followers. As such, the dichotomy of public and private space in the digital realm is not helpful and perhaps impossible to distinguish. For the purpose of this study, a public forum refers to a community-based social network that allows users to interact with each other online. Text messaging applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp and WeChat are also as much social media as the more popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Accordingly, for this study, languages and practices on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp Chat Groups were observed if relevant to the case studies of the research respondents.

**2.3 DATA ANALYSIS**

All data collected in this research are divided into two categories, which subsequently form the analysis for Chapters 4 and 5:-

Dataset 1 - Respondents’ observation and reflection on the trends and patterns of online SGBV through interview and survey

Dataset 2 - Language and narrative used by perpetrators of online SGBV in the form of tweets (as reply or quote tweets) on Twitter, posts or comments on Facebook and chats in WhatsApp chat groups.

The data are then processed and categorised based on topic and recurring patterns in an effort to identify the trends and commonalities among the case studies in this research. Seven variables were identified from dataset 1 and eight from dataset 2. These are as follows:-

No	Dataset 1	Dataset 2
1.	Dissociation and Association	Threats of Physical Violence
2.	Volume and Virality	Attacks on the Mind
3.	Consent and Control	Attacks on the Body
4.	Decontextualisation	Sexist and Misogynistic Attacks
5.	Echo Chamber	The Use (and Abuse) of Religions
6.	Disinhibition	Generalising Feminism
7.	Whose Right to Speak?	Reporting to the Authorities
8.		Victim Narratives

We recognise that while this research aims at describing the pattern, language and narratives of online SGBV, the act of interpretation and categorisation is done by the researcher based on her existing experience and knowledge.

**2.4 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

The design of the research was premised on the theory of change that:

Identifying the trends, patterns and impact of extremist speech and actions will lead to improved understanding of the issues and will, in turn, lead to improved articulation as to the arguments why the promotion of gender equality can play a role in preventing the rise of violent extremism in the country.

The scope of the research is limited to understanding speech and actions that lead to extremist speech and actions in relation to:

- a) Women’s freedom of expression
- b) Men’s defence of gender equality

As it is with every research and given the size of the sample and other restrictions, this study has certain limitations and biases. The sample size of 10 respondents does not reflect the population of more



than 15.3 million women<sup>40</sup> who are online and the 23.1% who are not online in Malaysia.<sup>41</sup> The geographical location of respondents during the course of research was therefore unsurprisingly disproportionate to the actual percentage of people accessing the internet in the different states – except for one respondent who resides in the state of Kelantan, all other respondents reside in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. However, given that a majority of internet users are concentrated in the urban space of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, the uneven geographical distribution is expected.

Furthermore, the research was not designed to be nationally representative, but to investigate in more detail the phenomena of extremism and violent extremism in response to women’s freedom of expression. Women’s freedom of expression is defined as freedom of opinion and expression, including expression in language, dressing and mannerisms.

The research design also had to consider a few facts: that there is no available statistic on the number of LGBTQ people in Malaysia; and the likelihood of extremist speech and actions or violent extremism would be directed at women more vocal on gender equality.

Despite the different levels of popularity among respondents, they are all individuals who are highly vocal and continue to be vocal despite the violence and abuse they receive. Many researches from different parts of the world, including EMPOWER’s report, “Voice, Visibility and A Variety of Viciousness” have shown that women withdrew themselves from using online social media platforms as a result of SGBV. But this research studies only women and allies who are *still online*. It does not represent the overall experience of women and allies online.

## 2.5 RESEARCH RESPONDENT PROFILES

**ASIAH ABD JALIL** is legally trained and a women’s rights activist, who identifies as a Muslim. Since young, she has been advocating against polygamous marriage, a practice that is deemed natural and fair among the Muslim community in Malaysia, especially the Islamic religious authorities and leaders. She often posts her thoughts in the national Malay language (*Bahasa Malaysia*) on her Facebook page, seeing that this helps in reducing language barriers between her and her readers.

This research looks at the abuse and violence against Asiah when she posted her views about polygamous marriage on Facebook in January 2017, in which she suggested that polygamous marriage should be disallowed and abolished.

**DECLAN LOKE**, is a queer activist and law student. Together with a few friends, Declan founded the PELANGI Campaign, an initiative that works toward an inclusive Malaysia that embraces and celebrates sexual and gender pluralism, with equal rights for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people. Declan often posts issues related to LGBTQ rights via PELANGI’s social media accounts.

This research looks at the attacks against *#CampurLGBT* (*#AcceptLGBT*) that took place on Twitter in March 2018, and Declan’s observation of this incident. The *#CampurLGBT* was a response to the *#TolakLGBT* (*#RejectLGBT*) movement, started in Indonesia amidst the anti-LGBT measures taken by the Indonesian government. Malaysians, predominantly Malay speaking Twitter users then reproduced anti-LGBT narratives online with the hashtag *#TolakLGBT*. To push back against that, *#CampurLGBT*

40 Department of Statistic Malaysia, “Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2014 – 2016” Updated on 22 July 2016, accessed 8 May 2018, [https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bu\\_id=OWIxdEVoYIJCS0hUZzJyRUcvZEYxZz09&menu\\_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09](https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bu_id=OWIxdEVoYIJCS0hUZzJyRUcvZEYxZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09)

41 Internet Users Survey 2017: Statistical Brief Number Twenty-One, 8.

emerged sometime in March 2018 to provide positive narratives and to promote the inclusion of LGBT people.

**MAJIDAH HASHIM**, works with Sisters in Islam (SIS), a national non-profit organisation that focuses on women's rights in Islam. She is a communication specialist and manages all social media platforms for SIS with her colleagues. In her personal accord, Majidah has been vocal about women's rights and gender equality on her social media accounts.

This research looks at the harassment against Majidah following her effort in pushing back against trolls and attackers of #WomensMarchMY.

**MARYAM LEE** is a postgraduate student at a public university in Kuala Lumpur, an activist and a writer. She strongly identifies as a Muslim feminist and uses social media to talk about life experiences and current issues.

This research looks at Maryam's experience in these 3 instances:

- a) During the month of Ramadan in 2016, Maryam recounted her experience on Facebook of being reprimanded by two men at a restaurant for eating during fasting hours. She did not fast on that day because she was menstruating. The hostile experience she encountered offline was reproduced and aggravated online.
- b) In 2017, Maryam took to Twitter to talk about her decision to stop donning the hijab. She was attacked and called a deviant.

- c) In early 2018, Maryam recounted her experience on Facebook of being chased out of the national mosque on the basis of her attire. The attacks started on her Facebook page which was made private and was subsequently brought to Twitter (via screen shot of Maryam's Facebook post) by one of the perpetrators from Facebook.

**RIZAL ROZHAN**, works with Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER), a national non-profit organisation that focuses on enabling women's voices and political participation. Rizal identifies himself as a Muslim and a feminist ally. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become an integral part of his activism and personal life in which he actively uses these social media platforms to share his daily life experiences, ideas and opinions.

This research looks at the harassment against Rizal following his effort in pushing back against trolls and attackers of #WomensMarchMY.

**SARAH\*** works in the field of education technology and is part of a team for gender issue-based platform. She identifies herself as a Muslim and a feminist. Sarah is passionate about gender equality and intersectionality and in broadening the discourse through the use of information and communication technologies.

This research looks at the interaction Sarah had with her extended family members in a WhatsApp Chat Group consisting of about 50 people. The interaction touches on sexual harassment among the progressive Muslim community.

**SYAR S. ALIA**, is a writer and project manager with experience in the arts industry. She often uses social media to share her daily expressions, ideas and opinions around current affairs, women's narratives and marginalized voices.

This research looks at the harassment against Syar following a picture posted by her on Twitter using the hashtag #WomensMarchMY. The hashtag was used as part of the communication strategy to amplify the women's march that took place in Kuala Lumpur, on 10 March 2018. After the march ended, the hashtag was hijacked by trolls and perpetrators and participants of the march became the target of abuse.

**VICTORIA CHENG** works with Projek Dialog, a non-profit organisation that promotes intercultural and interreligious dialogue. She is also vocal about topics like gender equality and reformist Islam. Victoria often talks about these issues via her organisation's social media account.

This research looks at two incidents of harassment that took place on Projek Dialogue's social media accounts, managed by Victoria and her other colleagues.

- a) In 2016, Victoria and other women visibly seen in a photo taken at a launch of an online quiz series called Hidayah Muslimah (enlightenment of Muslim Women) were attacked on Facebook. The attacks focused on their race and how they were dressed. Most of the commenters were unhappy to see a Chinese woman launching a quiz about Muslim women's rights and asked for her to cover up more as well.
- b) In December 2017, Projek Dialog's Twitter was trolled and harassed, all of which targeted at a specific tweet that stated "Gender adalah apa yang ada

di dalam otak anda dan bukan di antara kelangkang anda! (Gender is what is in your head and not between your legs!)" They started bombarding the twitter account by parroting the statement but inserting other things like "I identify as a chicken nugget today" to insult the person who made the statement.

**WARIS\*** is an independent content producer. She is interested in sociopolitical issues affecting women in this country and an avid advocate for media freedom.

This research looks at the attacks against #CampurLGBT (#AcceptLGBT) that took place on Twitter in March 2018, and Waris's observation of this incident.

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

This research looks at the harassment against Yvonne by human rights advocates and lawyers when she called out their sexist write-up that was disguised as a humorous response to a woman's inquiry on what to get her boyfriend for Christmas.

\*Names have been changed to protect the research respondents' privacy and security.

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# **CHAPTER 3: PATTERNS OF EXTREMIST SPEECH AND ACTIONS ONLINE**

The endemic existence of online sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and the absence of an official response towards these occurrences remind us that this form of violence is not exceptional, or that acts committed are only by abhorrent individuals. Fundamentally, it is a process of societal and political dominance over women's voices and visibility. Women and LGBTQ people face a startling amount of everyday violence on the internet within a toxic atmosphere that enable, encourage and sustain the perpetration of violent extremism.

In his triangle of violence framework, Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung argues that direct, personal violence is only one of three shapes which violence assumes. The other two categories of violence are structural and cultural violence. The latter two are more subtle but no less damaging. **Structural violence** is violence without a subject, inherent to the structure of society and political dominance of one social group over others; **direct violence** is personal, actor-generated and violence with a subject; and **cultural violence** is where aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimate violence in its direct or structural form.<sup>42</sup> True peace can only be obtained on all three corners at the same time, and not assuming that basic change in one will automatically lead to changes in the other two.

The internet is neither good nor bad, but it is definitely not neutral. Therefore, to combat SGBV, to uproot it, we need to move beyond mere elimination of violence that is visible to the eyes. Understanding the digital culture in which instances of SGBV occur and multiply is important. While much of the root causes of online SGBV are similar to the other forms of SGBV, the internet and technology have rendered perpetration of violence sometimes more visible, quicker and easier to perpetuate, and yet, it is a form of violence that is often trivialised and ignored. Hence, identifying the pattern in which the digital culture enables online SGBV is crucial in naming the unspeakable violence that happens

to women and LGBTQ people on a daily basis; the kind of violence invisible to the mind and the eyes of many; the kind of violence that validates, enables and reproduces perpetrators and harmful languages across platforms; the kind of violence that obliterate voices and visibility of women and the LGBTQ online.

### 3.1 DISSOCIATION AND ASSOCIATION

Early 2018, Maryam was attacked and abused online following her Facebook post that recounted her experience of being chased out of the national mosque because of her attire, an attire that she wore every day. The attacks started on her Facebook and were subsequently brought to Twitter by one of the perpetrators on Facebook. A few days later, Maryam received news of a decision made by her former employer, a civil society organization, to discontinue their working relationship with her. Three days later, to Maryam's surprise, the organisation had put up a Facebook announcement elaborating in length the dissociation between the organisation and Maryam. The incident at the national mosque was specifically cited as grounds for their decision. Among others, the post explained the act as "willfully contravening the express etiquettes of a sacred space does not reflect [the organisation]'s standpoint as a civil society organisation...". Maryam, in revisiting her thoughts about the public denouncement, says, "The public did not need to know, and the association of what I did with them was made only after the public announcement. Before that, nobody was talking or attacking them [her former organisation] for what I did. So that's what I thought was unfair".

Before the Women's March, Syar posted a selfie of herself on Twitter, showing the t-shirt she was wearing to the march and the placard she would be bringing. Syar wanted "to populate the hashtag and to show visibility of who's going to the march", and this is very much what she normally does on her social media. She then left home without taking her phone. The march was a peaceful and supportive one for Syar. She was surrounded by friends and comments

<sup>42</sup> Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3. (Aug., 1990), pp. 291-305

like “I like your sign”, “I like your shirt”. Few hours later, she finally went online and checked in to her Twitter, with the expectation to see pictures from the march, a favourite part of hers from the previous year’s women’s march. That was when she noticed her photo had gotten a lot of activity on Twitter accounts from Twitter handles that she did not recognize. Most of the comments were centered around her body hair, and in Syar’s words, “body hair is just a non-issue for me... it is something that I don’t think about”.

Among the attacks, one recurrent behavior was also yet another form of dissociation, by actively performing repulsiveness towards what they thought Syar represented.

This is her choice, and my choice is she can’t represent me. My stance, my choice.

...I repeat, someone who can’t bother making herself look presentable can’t represent me and I don’t think I am alone here.

I am sorry, if [yo]u don’t shave your armpit hair to make a point, you can’t represent me. If the only equality you can strive to achieve is that trivial (there are important matters in the world...surprise, surprise), you can shove that equality. No thanks.

“I didn’t respond to it, I struggle... nowhere in my post I said that I want to represent anyone, especially not you. But also, you think that’s what I am doing. I guess it is that thing, when you say you are a feminist, some people take it to mean that you want to represent all women”, says Syar.

In recounting her observation during #CampurLGBT, a tweetchat campaign calling for the inclusion of LGBTQ people into our everyday lives, Waris notices that among human rights allies, there is a need to disclaim their support for LGBT but at the same time, condone acts of violence against them. “So people feel like I need to distance myself from this first, before I am being accused of being a queer person, but I want to stand out to say ‘you cannot *tindas* (discriminate) these people, *diaorang ada hak, diaorang juga manusia* (they have rights, they are human too)’”. Waris’s thought on this is worth quoting at length:-

I think it would really help to have Muslim allies to normalise... the space, and the

kind of allyship that doesn’t say, ‘*aku tahu diaorang salah* (I know they are wrong),’... Can you just stand up for people without saying ‘I think they are wrong...’ there is a need to distance yourself from something that everybody dislike[s] or [from what] everybody think[s] is wrong.

We live in a world that is increasingly embedded in social media. We are supplied with a publicity machinery with a reach and power that is unprecedented, a machinery that renders us hyper visible and leaves a permanent mark digitally. Suddenly everyone is creating and publishing their contents online, as only powerful and famous people and corporations had before. Our expression becomes performative as we start to realise that we speak to audiences of hundreds and thousands, beyond our immediate pool of friends and family. Contents are created through a followers-driven gaze, and in some cases, it means having to self-censor not only to filter what one would normally say, but to say what one would not normally say as well. It is also this followers’ gaze that can require one to distance oneself or to shift one’s behaviour to protect oneself from foreseeable abuse and violence online.

Technology and the internet operate on an unequal playing field that pays favour not only to the powerful and the privileged, but to those who associate themselves to serve the powerful and the privileged. In Maryam’s case, the public denouncement by her former employer and organisation aggravated the attacks against Maryam. It was a validation for the attacks from one organisation that was publicly believed to be her ally. For Syar, the dissociation of Syar from the Twitter user’s very own womanhood reinforces the social stigmatisation of body hair on women’s body.

### 3.2 VOLUME AND VIRALITY

In all of the cases documented in this study, the violating content or event went viral almost instantly, and in Maryam and Asiah’s case, the contents were shared across different platforms without their consent and knowledge – reproducing violence and rendering it uncontainable. The sheer volume of these abusive comments can be overwhelming.

Majidah, in her observation of #WomensMarchMY on Twitter, shared, “It started off [with] just a few people who were name calling, and it just flooded

into a lot of people. And at the same time, even their retweeting was like really annoying. Coz the retweets are just [an] ignorant thing [the actions of retweeting were done out of ignorance of the women's march]...I was affected by the sheer volume of the tweets. They are so many of these people out there, and that was what affected me”.

When a triggering content has hit critical mass, it is often impossible to engage and to push back. “The minute this one thing, one source of content, or one bit of sharing, develops critical mass, it is out of your control and the narrative gets decided by other people. So, I don’t know what could have worked”, says Syar.

A recent survey done by Amnesty International notes that many women emphasize that the sheer volume of violent and abusive tweets they receive on Twitter is specifically what they find overwhelming.<sup>43</sup> Maryam notes that in terms of the narrative, there was not much difference whether it was on Facebook or Twitter. However, in terms of quantity, “It was fucking crazy on Twitter. You are talking about retweets and shares to the thousands of thousands... on my Facebook, on my own platform, the private one, I controlled it”.

It is always something of a mystery of how one particular online post or picture turns into something massive – where one abusive tweet or comments against a woman can multiply into hundreds of attacks against the woman within minutes. Syar notes that the body hair was a very small part of the photo, among other things (the t-shirt and signage with quotes on feminism) that usually attract trolls. “Because they saw some people pointing it out, there were probably one or two people who first zoomed into the photo and drew attention to it... So once that happened, those tweets went viral and then I think it becomes easier for them to be like ‘let’s pile on, let’s jump on that train’. Instead of, let’s develop a new thing to get mad about”, says Syar.

It is the very nature of social media, the internet and technology that allows content to go viral instantaneously. This means violence and extremism can be reproduced and sustained with very little solution available to victims to contain the spread of it. In the above-mentioned cases, it is often the individual that has to experience the amplified hate

and violence on social media, and in the absence of any intervention from social media platforms and law enforcers, the individual is rendered defenceless and helpless in such situations.

### 3.3 CONSENT AND CONTROL

In Malaysia, polygamy is deemed a right of Muslim men since it is a *sunnah*<sup>44</sup> of Prophet Muhammad. “As Muslim women, we were made to believe that we must submit to the *hukum*<sup>45</sup> without any questioning. I think not many women’s rights groups are vocal about polygamous marriages, because the debate and argument would involve long discussions about *hukum*”, says Asiah. In January 2017, she made public her objection towards polygamous marriages on her Facebook. In a short few days, the post gained 600 likes and 400 shares. The debates and attacks against her were happening everywhere—on the comment section of her original post, on the comment section of those who shared her original post, and on many other blog sites and websites. “I didn’t take part in any debate on other spaces other than my own Facebook wall. I only replied to comments on my Facebook”. She adds, “Since my Facebook posting about polygamous marriages a year ago, I have received so many negative responses from people all over the country. But it was okay, I could handle all those. My threshold is really high”.

Asiah has been careful in her privacy setting on Facebook. She has disabled comments by the public and restricted comments to only from *friends* on her Facebook, so that she can block out unwanted intrusion from unknown persons. Even then, non-friends and public members were able to find ways to share screen captures of her original post.

It makes no sense that one can take an array of steps to restrict the visibility of their social media content, but there is no stopping of others (friends or not) from taking a screenshot of this private form of communication and distribute to a wider and/or different audience. In Asiah’s case, all of which was done without her consent.

In Maryam’s case, despite knowing she has “changed her privacy setting”, it did not occur to the perpetrator that Maryam may not want the content to be viewed by those beyond her *friends* list. When he screen captured her content and shared it with a non-friend

43 Amnesty International, “#ToxicTwitter: Violence and abuse against women online”, (London, United Kingdom: 2018), pp. 31, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Toxic-Twitter.pdf>

44 Traditional social and legal custom  
45 principle

of Maryam, his action constituted a violation of her privacy.



Consent is complicated in the digital age, especially with the blurred line between private and public space. However, the research does not focus on this issue of consent, and so, more relevant here is the consequence of dissemination of content beyond the intended audience by the original author. "Once my post is shared on their wall, they are free to discuss on their own space about me as a person or the way I think, free from any interference from me", said Asiah. This implies that extremism can fester and be fostered without any form of objection, and in this way, can become a normalised phenomenon, or worse, a deliberate or desired phenomenon. It is this danger that makes it necessary for those engaged in preventing or countering violent extremism to dialogue and impress upon platform designers and providers the need to ensure greater technical control to the user on the use, capture, and distribution of the user's content.

### 3.4 DECONTEXTUALISATION

Majidah firmly believes in reclaiming Twitter as a safer space for women, LGBTQ people and allies. When the Twitter attacks against participants of the women's march happened on 10 March 2018, she was one of the many who organised a push back effort towards the trolls and perpetrators. Despite all the name calling and violent comments, Majidah tried to be as factual as she could by providing facts, links to various articles and research done by the United Nations, civil society and much more. One of her tweets received countless replies and quote tweets, with most of them being hostile. Her tweet reads as follows:

But in reality, things are not so simple. *That is why antara tuntutan #WomensMarchMY hari ini adalah supaya semua gender diberi peluang belajar, bekerja dan gaji sama rata. Ia juga menuntut supaya budaya rogol dan keganasan gender dihapuskan.* (That is why among the demands for #WomensMarchMY today is to ask for equal access to education, employment and equal wages for all genders. It also asked for the removal of rape culture and gender-based violence).

"They took apart the tweet and they started deconstructing it... They dismissed everything where fair wages and employment is concerned and only hopped on one [admission rate for males and females in university]", says Majidah. This is compounded by the bite-size nature of information on the platform. Every time Majidah's tweet is retweeted, "It went to a different direction and they [these retweets] take a life of [their] own" where Majidah was no longer involved.

In 2016, Maryam commented on her Twitter the phenomenon of Malay families putting on the *hijab* on baby girls. Most of the public refused to understand where she was coming from and deliberately took her message out of context. A few days later, many media and gossip sites picked up her Twitter thread and turned it into a story of how Maryam decided to take off the *hijab* (when in fact she did not talk about her decision to stop donning the *hijab* in the original Twitter thread). Maryam became a target of public anger.

Syar notices too how her original content on Twitter had split and branched off into different pockets of conversations, without necessarily linking back to her original tweet. While such is the inherent effect of the diffused feature of the internet, what she found troubling was the assumption of her voice and narrative. Syar says:-

*"The other things that kind of disturbed me was people's assumption about my intention. My intention to represent someone, my intention to make a statement with my armpit hair, my intention to rebel with my armpit hair... There was something so jarring of being so visible but not being seen... the feeling of your narrative being taken out of your control is all so hard".*



The same pattern can be observed in the spread of extremist ideology and propaganda. In a survey by European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), explains:-

Propaganda, as a tool of extremist ideologies, aims to generate and promote a world view that reduces the complexity of life to a simple black and white picture. This structured attempt to reform the cognitive (and emotional) perceptions of a target audience to initiate an action in the interest of the propagandist has probably been a part of every political or religious conflict.<sup>46</sup>

Violent extremists construct their propaganda through a range of emotional and sensational codes to capture the public's attention. To galvanise support, a propagandist has to disseminate their information as rapidly and as broadly as possible.<sup>47</sup>

Twitter and other social media platforms are changing the cultural format in which we hold discussions and conversations – it has become more complex, ironic and multi-layered. Social media technologies encourage rapid trading and attention-grabbing ideas over contextualised and slow thinking, and they are made to diffuse emotive and reactionary contents at a lightning speed. In this sense, it is no surprise that violent extremists of all stripes are increasingly adept at using social media to propagate their ideologies.

### 3.5 ECHO CHAMBER

The term “echo chamber” has gained popularity over the years with the increased polarised and extremist views as seen in political campaigns, spread of misinformation and disinformation, troll factories, online bullying and more. The term “echo chamber” is defined in the Oxford dictionary as “an environment

in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced, and alternative ideas are not considered”.<sup>48</sup>

In reflecting the #CampurLGBT campaign and #WomensMarchMY attack, Waris believes that people have actually stopped having conversations on social media a long time ago. “You go in already with a position. There is no conversation. So a lot of campaigns are really about visibility... and things are not up for negotiation, especially when we are talking about rights”, says Waris.

Social media is where we communicate collectively and users find a sense of belonging to a loose form of community or network through sharing, liking and commenting. Users tend to cement one another's thoughts and beliefs. This stands in stark contradiction to the promise of the internet as a mind-expanding and limitless realm for discourse and exchange of ideas.

Rizal was one of the feminist allies who took part in pushing back against the attacks on participants of #WomensMarchMY. One particular Twitter user caught his attention. The Twitter user had attacked and dismissed the effort of the women's march by using facts and arguments that appear to be logic and sounded articulated. The Twitter user had claimed that the march was trivial and that feminists should talk about issues like female genital mutilation in Africa. While the comments were *civilised*, “a lot of the trolls [who started by abusing #WomensMarchMY], they supported her. For them, it resonates, and they retweet. And then I jumped in as well [to push back] and said, there [are] a lot of issues in Malaysia too [in relation to Female Genital Mutilation]... even when I tried to quote tweet or replies on her tweet, it didn't get as many RT as hers”. Rizal believes that the comments by the Twitter user, even in the absence of violent and abusive language, offer legitimisation to the extremist behaviour by the other perpetrators, who had attacked the march using abusive and violent language.

In a slightly different scenario, Sarah found herself feeling helpless and attacked in a family WhatsApp chat group of around 50 individuals when the discussion turned to the sexual harassment allegation

46 Alexander Ritzmann, “Violent Extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean Region”, in the 8th Euromed Survey, (Barcelona, Spain: 2017), edited by European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), pp. 26 - 32, [http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2017/role\\_propaganda\\_in\\_violent\\_extremism\\_how\\_to\\_counter\\_Alexander\\_Ritzmann\\_EuromedSurvey2017.pdf/](http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2017/role_propaganda_in_violent_extremism_how_to_counter_Alexander_Ritzmann_EuromedSurvey2017.pdf/)

47 Travis Morris, “Extracting and Networking Emotions in Extremist Propaganda”, in European Intelligence and Security Informatics Conference 2012, (United States: Norwich University, 2012), 53 - 59, doi: 10.1109/EISIC.2012.33, <http://www.csis.pace.edu/~ctappert/dps/2012EISIC/data/4782a053.pdf>

48 See: [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/echo\\_chamber](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/echo_chamber)

against Tariq Ramadan.<sup>49</sup> Generally, the family members looked up to Tariq Ramadan and refused to consider the victims' stories. Sarah felt that there was a lot of denial, disbelieving of women's experiences and generalisation of feminism among her family members. She spoke up against her family members in the chat group and at some point, the conversation became heated and it was ended abruptly by one of the women in the chat group.

Sarah was the only one who spoke up in the family chat group. "There are a few cousins who shared my views but [didn't] speak out. Because they feel like it is the wrong environment to do so, that their efforts will be wasted". Several of her cousins texted Sarah in private for moral support and two of them exited the chat group as a result of the conversation. "They feel as though there is no use because our voices will be just drowned out anyway. Which is more or less what happened to me", added Sarah. In reflecting the entire course of engagement, Sarah believes that it had made her family members and relatives more defensive and "even cemented their beliefs more than anything else".

In Sarah's case, the conflicts and divisions of opinions seem to fall along generational divisions, that is, her generation and her parents' generation. One such comment by the others in the chat group was "This [feminism] wasn't even a problem during my generation, I am surprised it is an issue now".

Sarah wonders if the outcome would have been different if she were to communicate her stance in the language that they would understand, i.e. deepening her understanding on what the Quran said about SGBV, to approach this from a different perspective, instead of becoming defensive. However, at the same time, she is perplexed, "Why is it so opposable when she talks about rights and feminism and why is the language so off-putting?" She feels disappointed that she has to compromise, but at the same time, she would not want to reduce the language of rights and feminism, as she finds power and solace within such language.

<sup>49</sup> Early 2018, Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan was investigated and arrested by the French law enforcers over allegations of sexual assault and rape. Read more at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/tariq-ramadan-face-french-judge-sex-assault-case-180202131852176.html>

### 3.6 DISINHIBITION

Maryam had the opportunity of meeting one of her perpetrators during an event shortly after she was abused on social media over her post on the Ramadan incident. Maryam spoke to her without knowing that she was one of the perpetrators. Later in the day, the person sent her a text saying, "When you were bashed online, I followed the mob and I bashed you also, very heavily, and I judged you. But after talking to you today, you are actually a nice person". This, however does not always happen, "because not everyone gets to talk to me personally *kan?*" says Maryam.

Waris believes that there are a lot of things we say on Twitter that we won't say it to somebody's face. "The distance online allows us to bicker, to even cut off a conversation half way, allows us to walk away, to *seru* (call out), kind of great and kind of awful as well". Waris's reflection upon her state of mind during #WomensMarchMY and #CampurLGBT is important to note:

During the week of #WomensMarchMY and #CampurLGBT, the pushback itself was almost robotic, I really did not feel anything... I think maybe I have lost humanity in the way I use this space... Even prior to that, [the trolls] don't hurt me. And it is actually an awful feeling to know that you are not hurt... I look at [the trolls] not as a person, but as an idea, almost an institution... And it is easy, because I know he will pow in that space [he will occupy and hoard the space], maybe not in the offline space... the power he does not have in the offline space, I don't want to make it my problem. So, I only look at the power he has online.

Until I realise that something was hurting me, and I felt tired, emotionally drained and then I have to back track and figure out where is this feeling coming from. So, turns out, I am a human.

Research into the motivation for online aggression is limited, more so in the Malaysian context. What is clear is that the distance online has the effect of disinhibiting almost everyone and people behave in ways that they would not when away from the screen. However, in almost all cases reported here, the abusive and trolling behaviour online relies on social

and cultural norms that institutionalizes misogyny and extremism.

During #WomensMarchMY, Rizal was attacked on Twitter when he called out one Twitter user for inciting violence against participants of the march. The said Twitter user's friend then came to the defence of his friend, and posted, "We should wage a war against this, Rizal", "Apa lagi KB? Isterat perang lar, kalau aku nak ajar, sepak dengan kakinya (What else do you want? Let's declare a war, if I were to teach you a lesson, I would kick you)". He was also name-called, among others, "Soy boy" and "pussy hunter". Rizal did not reply. He believed that by him replying, it would aggravate the situation and trigger more attacks against him.

Declan observed that during the #CampurLGBT campaign, most of the attackers are Twitter users with male profiles. Declan opines that internet troll culture is inherently masculine.

This is an observation shared by Victoria, Maryam, Asiah, Rizal, and Majidah in their respective experiences too, while the rest believe it was a mix of all genders. In cases where the attacks appear to come from both males and females, Waris notices that the men tend to be more aggressive and violent in their expression during #CampurLGBT, while the women tend to express shock and fear of the visibility of LGBT. Victoria too noticed that women tend to be less assertive with their opinions or they will agree with what the men tweeted.

### 3.7 WHOSE RIGHT TO SPEAK?

In early 2014, Yvonne found herself amidst a social media controversy after she called out an article as sexist. The article was posted on a blog run by a group of Kuala Lumpur-based lawyers and an online news media. An anonymously written article, was posted on the blog and an online news media as a humorous response to a woman's inquiry on what to get her boyfriend for Christmas. The blog owners identified themselves. The following is an excerpt of the article:

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

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

Yvonne was harassed on multiple social media platforms by members of the blog along with their friends. Most of them denied the article was sexist or claimed that she was unable to take a joke. Several of them had claimed that Yvonne had not been fair by calling them out publicly on the basis that they have done some good work for the human rights movement in Malaysia. *"As human rights lawyers, they should know that freedom of expression... does not mean that you are free to discriminate... I have already stated my case on Twitter, and that's what you have responded to"*, says Yvonne.

When Maryam came under attack in 2018 over her Facebook post pertaining to her experience at the national mosque, several known human rights activists were among those who attacked her. Among others, a known human rights lawyer left a comment with a patronising and condescending undertone. Many had come to Maryam's defence. Despite that, the expression made by the known human rights lawyer received many 'likes' and were welcomed by many other attackers. Maryam does not notice differences in the attacks by the conservatives or liberals, strangers or allies, "because the language they used is similar... like 'you have crossed the line, not the right way to do things, you are not a true feminist'. You know, isn't this what your enemy is telling you?"

From the above two examples, it appears that there is an underlying assumption that your right to freedom of expression is as good as any others, that we are all equal when it comes to our ability in exercising that right. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2015: Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women notes that measures to address online abuse and SGBV, especially when it relates to drawing limits around content and expression, is sometimes seen as limiting

the right to freedom of expression.<sup>50</sup> Many speak of abuse and violence against women and LGBTQ people online as a right to freedom of expression. Save for cases where direct physical death and rape threats are involved, the rest is an ocean of uncharted waters. Freedom of expression is a highly gendered discourse and debunking its egalitarian myth and its enjoyment by mostly privileged groups is important in unpacking the realities of online SGBV.

### 3.8 CONCLUSION

The internet and technology can no longer shield itself from the pretence of a neutral and egalitarian design that offer an equal playing field to everyone. Instances of online SGBV are enabled and abetted by a hostile online environment premised on a social structure that discriminate women and LGBTQ people – a structure that legitimise and at times, remains silent over the abuses, harassment, trolling, and attacks against women, LGBTQ people, and anyone who defends gender equality and stands up against misogynistic ideologies.

Even in the absence of targeted attacks, the hostile environment has left many to censor themselves, as with Sarah's cousins. In some of the cases, the respondents were left with no option but to disengage and cease defending themselves. Rizal in reflecting why he made the decision to not engage, says, "I don't know how many people will actually help, and I think that I am just going to make life hard for everyone else, for my allies. It is something that is really insignificant, if I can compare that to all the attacks against my allies... The issue here is definitely we are a small group lah, really a small group. So an attack on one of us, will really drain a lot of resources".

While there is much to explore and examine about the manner in which online SGBV is perpetrated through the internet and technology, what is apparent is that SGBV is not simple and monolithic; it is not incidental, or an act committed only by the evil actors. If anything, this chapter shows that online SGBV is constantly evolving, adapting and finding its way to where women and LGBTQ people are. It

is, as with other forms of SGBV, a process of political and societal dominance over women's agency and voices; of defending and protecting their privileged entitlements and status quo; and of cannibalising and silencing the experiences of women, LGBTQ people and their allies. Because the very premise of why SGBV and as an extension of that, online SGBV, happens is due to gender inequality, meaningful transformation from extremism and the inclinations of violent extremism can only start to take place if gender equality is consciously and actively promoted and defended.

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50 Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2015: Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women, pg 33, <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/best-practice-forums/623-bpf-online-abuse-and-gbv-against-women/file>

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# **CHAPTER 4: THE NARRATIVE AND THE LANGUAGE**

This chapter considers the narratives and language which respondents in this research encounter during incidents of online sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). “Every time there was an attack, there is the first reactionary wave of attacks that revolve around my body, usually size and weight. When that gets called out as abusive and derogatory, the second wave of attacks come from a more ‘intellectual’ tone or argument, often trying to rationally justify harassment”. The aforesaid statement by Maryam succinctly frames the process of online SGBV through which violence is manifested and reinforced by language and narratives, and not exclusively confined to commonly known vile words in a dictionary. In another instance, Rizal notes that during #WomensMarchMY, the first wave of attacks was mostly aggressive, emotional and they are often built on harmful prejudices against women and LGBTQ people, rather than on points of argument. The second wave of attacks appears to be more “civilised” and factual-based. “They [second wave attackers] would receive endorsements from people who initially attacked us [first wave attackers]... [the first wave attackers] didn’t know how to articulate the issue. And when they saw the arguments of [the second wave of attackers],<sup>51</sup> they would endorse, they retweet, and they would give their opinions, suddenly they would have an opinion *lah*. Suddenly they know how to articulate”, says Rizal.

Online SGBV affects not only women and LGBTQ people, but even allies who defend the need for gender equality, as with Rizal’s experience. In such an environment, it is imperative to look at the language and its relation in the reproduction of violence; to understand the ways in which language legitimises violence and creates certain realities that justify violent extremism. Unpacking and debunking the neutrality myth of language and exposing its highly gendered nature is fundamental if we ever want to achieve a truly just and equal society.

51 This appears to reflect the extremist movement of having professionals as part of this movement, to speak through the lens of such ideologies but appear to be putting forward facts with their arguments.

All data in this chapter are expressions mainly in the form of tweets (as reply or quote tweets) on Twitter, posts or comments on Facebook and chats in WhatsApp chat groups. The data are in a mix of English and the national Malay language (*Bahasa Malaysia*). There are exceptions among the data where an expression was made through images or GIF (Graphic Interchange Format). Most of the data are captured by the research respondents, with the exception of #WomensMarchMY, #CampurLGBT and Maryam’s mosque incident wherein real-time collection of relevant tweets were done by the researcher in the form of screenshots. The data are then processed, analysed and categorised using a qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO. Datasets are analysed based not only on their literal meaning but also the cultural context and connotations that follow. The language and narrative used by perpetrators are multi-layered and there was an overlapping of categories.

In addition, these data are by no way representational of the entire conversation or attacks against the respondents. Exchange on social media are asynchronous and diffused. The conversations may have been removed, accounts suspended, or replies and conversations could happen beyond the knowledge of the research respondents and the researcher – which render it a challenge to reassemble the entirety of the incidents in question.

## 4.1 THREATS OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Threats of physical violence can be physical or sexual in nature. Instances of direct violence (where author/speaker claims to want to inflict physical harm on the other) appear to be rarer as compared to indirect threats (where physical harm towards the other is desirable and justified), with a lot of them telling the respondents to “die”, “go to hell”, or “to not exist”.

Language used in indirect physical violence are subtler in nature but no less damaging. While it in no way appears to threaten to inflict physical harm on

its victims, but as described by Waris, “the violence was really the denial of your existence. And basically, you cannot be seen, how dare you show your face. That to me was the biggest violence”.

Threats that are transmitted digitally do not render them any less traumatising. They are received and experienced bodily as anyone would experience in the physical world. When Maryam was abused for her expression on the hijab, and seeing that the online violence did not subside after a few days, she had her suitcase all packed up in case she needed to run away for her physical safety. “The fear of being recognised was real, and I took steps to make sure I don’t go out unnecessarily in public. I only go to meet friends at their homes and not go outside to eat”, says Maryam. Some examples of tweets frequently received by Maryam:-



**Maryam lee ni aku takut perangai dia mencetuskan sifar radikal dlm kalangan masyarakat setempat yg tercabar dgn kebodohan dia. If one day dia kene ugut atau kene bunuh, i’m not surprise at all. Hati2 maryam lee, cabaran diiringi balasan**

*This Maryam [L]ee is invoking radicalism among the local society with her stupidity. If one day she was ever threatened or murdered, I won’t be surprised at all. Beware [M]aryam [L]ee, provocation comes with repercussion.*

**Boleh tak org mcm Maryam Lee ni kita tembak je sbb anything coming out her mouth is beyond stupidity.**

*Can we just shoot someone like this Maryam Lee because anything coming out from her mouth is beyond stupidity.*

**Maryam Lee is cancelled.**

During the women’s march in Malaysia in March 2018, the event hashtag #WomensMarchMY which trended on Twitter for two and a half days, was used to harass and attack participants and supporters of

the march.<sup>52</sup> In some posts, extremist, rape, hate and violent comments and threats were made. Some of them has since been removed by Twitter following reports made.



**takde ke pemandu lori mabuk yang boleh sapu bersih puak #WomensMarchMY tu**

*Isn’t there any drunk lorry driver that can wipe clean this group of #WomensMarchMY*



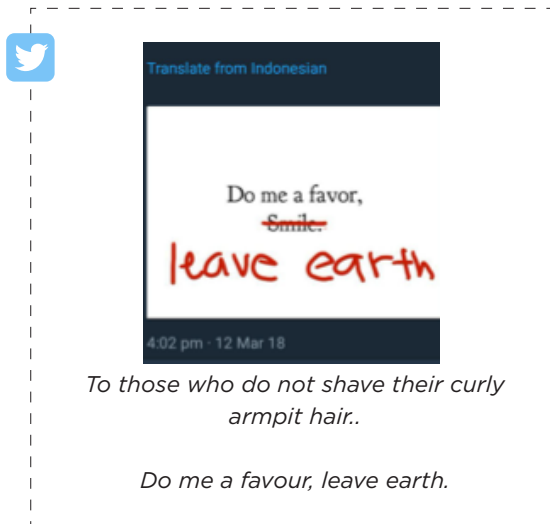
The picture above shows a march participant holding up a sign that says “Rape is rape”, but the tweet suggests that she is safe from being raped because of how she looks.

**Kim Jong Un please just fucking nuke this country already, or better, anyone who support this shit**

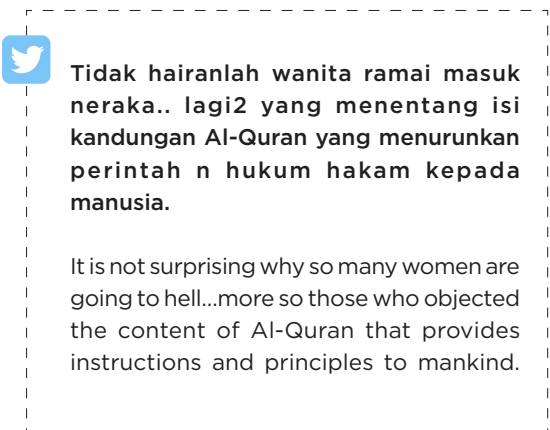
**Kita perlukan young American skool kid shooter tuk tembak org kat sini**

*We need American school kids shooter to shoot all the people here*

<sup>52</sup> niel Dzulkifly, “After Women’s March, participants harassed online and offline”, The Malay Mail Online, 10 March 2018, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/after-womens-march-participants-harassed-online-and-offline>



Example from Asiah (below) of a response when she rationalised her opposition to polygamy.



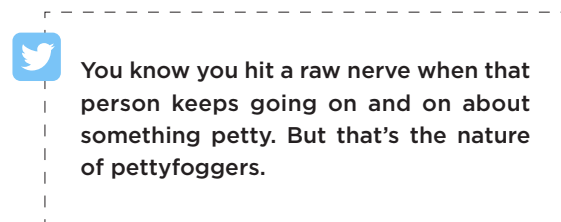
## 4.2 ATTACKS ON THE MIND

Women, LGBTQ people and allies are also attacked on their mental and emotional capacity. Most of these attackers assumed that there is something wrong with the mind of *these people*; that they are incapable of thinking *right* and in exercising their own agency; that they are stupid, crazy, *otak rosak* (brain damaged), angry, petty, jealous and the list goes on. This is perhaps an all too familiar narrative and language told to survivors of SGBV where their voices are often disbelieved and trivialised.

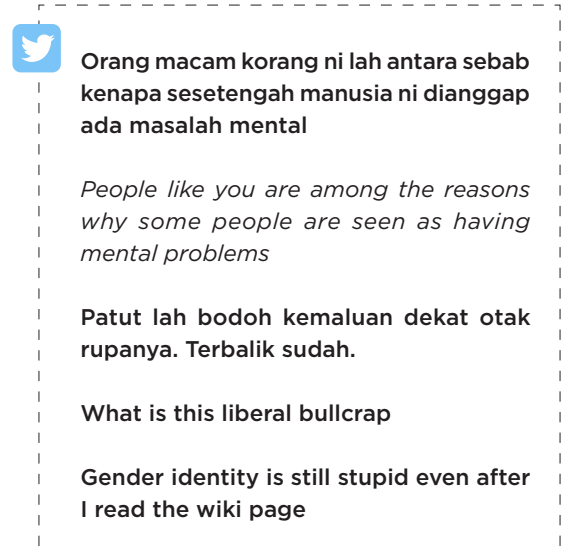
SGBV and gender-based discrimination are an ancient oppression so deeply ingrained in our society and culture, that they are becoming something

natural, normalised and simply non-questionable. While many women’s rights activists have recognised such violence within the framework of patriarchy and power, it has never been similarly analysed as extremism already normalised. This violence has escalated to a level where even the discourse and expression demanding for gender equality, and defending women’s rights and/or gender equality, are labelled alien, unthinkable, illogical, unreasonable and so on and therefore warranting such attacks. In many of the cases here, it is almost a natural response from the perpetrators to denounce and demonise the minds of others as “not right” in an attempt to defend and protect the status quo and to save themselves from having to question their existing and singular worldviews.

Yvonne recalls that there were very clear attempts to paint her as an angry individual, “and really that’s all you have to say right? Because an angry woman is automatically unlikable therefore you don’t have to listen to her”. Yvonne was called a “pettyfogger” repeatedly for calling out sexism:



Many called Projek Dialog’s tweet on gender identity stupid:-







*No wonder you're stupid, your private parts are your brains. It is the other way around already. What is this liberal bullcrap. Gender identity is still stupid after I read the wiki page.*

Maryam was frequently called “brain damaged”, mentally ill and many other derogatory terms and phrases online, both from strangers and human rights allies:-



**Bengang ya allah baca status mrym lee kat facebook, dia ni letak otak kat mana weh? Adoi**

*I feel Maryam's status on Facebook is stupid, where did she put her brain? Adoi.*

**Makcik dah terlalu kesian kat mantan gadis berhijab yg pakai short skirt ke masjid tu. Seriously she has some mental or psychological problem. May Allah give her guidance**

*Auntie<sup>53</sup> sympathises this girl who does not don the hijab and wear short skirt to a mosque. Seriously she has some mental or psychological problem. May Allah giver her guidance.*

Rizal was called stupid when he tried to explain existing gender disparity in Malaysia:-



**Male feminist memang bodoh fakta. Buang je lah testis pergi bervagina sana**

The facts given by male feminists are stupid indeed. Just throw away your testicles and get a vagina there.

<sup>53</sup> Colloquial reference of respect for older people sometimes used as a self-reference by older persons as well.

Examples from #WomensMarchMY:



**ni ke feminism? macam orang gua takde akal je aku tengok**

*Is this feminism? looks like cave people with no brain to me*

Many too assumed Asiah was incapable of having a mind of her own when she expressed her opinion on polygamy, for it is unthinkable to the perpetrators that polygamy can be a form of gender-based oppression:-



**Dia keluaran pendapat mengenai poligami ikut LOGIK AKAL sendiri yg xboleh pakai. Kononnya nak gunakan ALASAN kemudaratn untuk menghapuskan system poligami... Alasan bodoh aku pernah dengar.**

*She came out with her own opinion on polygamy based on her own useless RATIONALITY. Purportedly using the archaic REASONING to eliminate the polygamy system.. Stupid reasoning*

**Konstruk awak punya otak dulu sebelum nilai hukum Allah seabodoh itu.**

*Construct your own brain first before you judge Allah's principle as stupid as this.*

This particular statement below dismisses Asiah's opinion by painting her as a stereotypical jealous woman who behaves vindictively based on her irrational emotion and self-centeredness.



**Hukum ketetapan Quran is akan kekal hingga hari kiamat. Tiada siapa boleh ubah melainkan dia kufur dan ingin mencabar Allah...Hanya atas dasar cemburu sahaja dia cakap macam tu**

**atau pun dia memang ingin lawan hukum ketetapan Allah. Ini yg kita takutkan.**

*The principle established in Quran will always be here until end of world. No one can change it unless he or she is blasphemous and want to challenge Allah.. Only because out of jealousy she said all that or she indeed wants to challenge the principle set by Allah. This is what we are afraid of.*

### 4.3 ATTACKS ON THE BODY

Women's bodies and sexuality, even in the online realm, are not spared from shaming, policing, and attempts to control. Such forms of attacks tend to occur when images were part of the triggering content. Victoria and three other women (two of them were Muslims while Victoria and one other woman were non-Muslims) came under attack in 2016 on Facebook when they were visibly seen in a photo taken at a launch of a quiz series called *Hidayah Muslimah* (enlightenment of Muslim Women). As soon as the photo was posted on Facebook, they were attacked at the comment section on the basis of their religion, physical appearance and their genders. "And then they elaborated by talking about our body parts, saying that we are showing off our armpits and thighs, and that is a gross insult to Islam, it is further proof that we are not fit to launch the quiz... because we are not covering our *aurat* in the Muslim ways they perceived", says Victoria. The attacks were entirely on the body and gender-based with only one exception, where the user took the quiz and labelled the quiz as "a bunch of craps and the Prophet's wife should not be turned into an idol".

The basis for the attacks on women's bodies are usually because of religious beliefs, stereotypes or patriarchal social norms. In some cases, it is a combination of both.

In almost all of the narratives collected in the research, Muslim women are disproportionately targeted not only for their gender identity as women, but also as Muslim women. The convergence of religion and patriarchy provides for an unquestionable superiority and control over women's bodily autonomy. Even in the absence of state-imposed laws and regulations,

women are socially conditioned to conform to religious dressing, and told that the blame lies with them if they do not cover their *aurat*. Some examples of religious-based attacks:



**Tapi the entire thread about that Maryam girl yg bukak tudung tu, he said dulu masa bertudung pun baju ketat etc, & basically telling**

*But the entire thread about that Maryam girl who stopped donning the hijab, he says formerly even when she was wearing a hijab her clothes were tight etc, and basically telling.*

**She can't even protect her aurat...Why someone should even protect their rights...**

**FUHH...DAHSYAT...SEMUA GENG MUSLIMAH DIA PAKAI MENGIKUT SUNNAH...ADA YG TAK TUTUP RAMBUT.. TAYANG KETIAK..TAYANG PEHA... FUHH...HEBAT...**

*Wow... So amazing... Her Muslimah gang is all decked out in clothes mandated by the Sunnah... There are some that did not cover their aurat, some who are showing off their armpits, and showing off thighs... Wow... Wonderful.*

Other than religious policing of women's bodies, women's bodies are also prejudiced against because of societal expectations of women as strictly feminine and must conform to social perceptions of acceptable beauty — a common narrative across all segments of society, and one that most respondents do not actively engage in for various reasons. Syar thinks that the attacks on her body hair were "absurd and laughable" at first, but a few days later, she realises that she was "kinda run down by it". "The feeling of... my selfie, my photo and myself, that I have shared on my public accounts, that I was happy to share... being used in a way that actually made me feel violated", says Syar.

One of the tweets read as follows, where the credibility of a woman's mind and opinion is predetermined by her physical appearance:



**If you want to introduce something 'new' to the masses, eliminate distractions. Pegi la mandi dulu, pakai pakaian yang elok sikit, cukur la bulu ketiak tu. #WomensMarchMY**

*If you want to introduce something 'new' to the masses, eliminate distractions. Go get a shower, wear nicer clothes, shave your armpit. #WomensMarchMY*

Some other examples of norm-based attacks:



**untung kena halau kalau dtg masjid Seremban sini gemok mmg kena pijak beramai-ramai**

You are lucky to be chased out of mosque, in Seremban, you fatso will be stepped on by lots of people.

**You seriously need a lobotomy and a mixed dose of pentobarbital, potassium chloride and pancuronium bromide**

**Yang atas pun x cukur, yang bawan hutan rimba agaknya**

The top is not shaved, I guess the bottom must be a wild forest.

#### 4.4 SEXIST AND MISOGYNISTIC ATTACKS

Online SGBV faced by women almost always take the form of degrading and harmful stereotypes against women and gender non-conforming people, which sometimes include sexual profanity. The control of women's sexuality and their sex lives lies at the core of patriarchy – where women are socially constructed to feel shame, guilt and filth for having sex or in talking about sex, a deliberate extension of how they are made to feel about their bodies.

During #WomensMarchMY, speculation of women's sex lives and sexuality were one of the narratives used to attack the participants of the march, perhaps in an

attempt to assert power and to silence these women. Some examples are:



**Siang siang berarak benci patriaki Malam malam menganggang choke me dedi**

*March early in the day detesting patriarchy Late at night open wide choke me daddy*

**Untung la tight af. Mesti makan jamu mak dara**

*So fortunate la tight af (as fuck). Must have virgin feasting session*

Male allies were not spared too from sexual profanity. Among others, they were called “*Pemburu pussy feminist* (Feminist pussy hunter)”, or “vagina”, the latter is a clear attempt to emasculate. The narrative, though different in forms, shares its roots with a detrimental misogynistic and extremist worldview of gender and gender roles – the association of inferiority and submissiveness to women and the labelling of men as the protector, provider, leader, and the dominant one in any institution (family, workplace, religion, etc.).

In Asiah's case, many of the perpetrators resorted to citing the stereotyped role assigned to women in relation to marriage and unsuitability of being a leader (because she is illogical and emotional).



**Fuh, mujo mufti dilantik bukan dlm kalangan perempuan...**

**Yg lebih parah, ada jugak follower yg stujui, hadui**

*Luckily Mufti is not appointed among women.*

*What's more worrying is that, there are followers who agreed. Sigh.*

**Kalo dh kahwin, sy doakan laki akak jadi ceo company besar dan berjaya. So dia bleh and akan kawin sampai full quota.**



**Kalo belum, aku doakan ko jadi bini yg ke-4**

*If she is married, I pray that your husband will succeed and become CEO of big company. So that he can marry to the maximum of quota allowed. If not, I pray that you will become the 4th wife.*

#### 4.5 THE USE [AND ABUSE] OF RELIGION

The use of religion in instances of online SGBV is perhaps where most respondents find challenging and difficult to engage. Religion often forms the basis of arguments that cut across all counter narratives to gender equality and women’s rights—from ones that are faith-based to outright extremist narratives calling for the elimination of these people. Most of the datasets predominantly speak to the use/abuse of Islam as a religion. This is not unexpected as Muslims make up the majority of the Malaysian population. Women, in all diversity, are often made to bear the brunt of upholding moral, culture and religious values of society, at the expense of their freedom of expression, of association, of assembly and of mobility. Religious pretexts are often put forward to justify the lack of acceptance of the principle of the universality of women’s and LGBTQ people’s human rights.

##### 4.5.1 WHO IS ENTITLED TO TALK ABOUT RELIGION?

The first hurdle perhaps is one’s perceived *qualification* in making a comment on religion. A Muslim friend defended Victoria when she was attacked on Facebook over the launch of the quiz. The friend’s profile picture was visible to the perpetrator in which she was not wearing a *hijab*. The perpetrator replied to the friend and said “*You also tak pakai tudung, you don’t talk* (You also don’t don the hijab, you don’t get to talk)”.

Women’s physical appearance is often one of a subject determining their right to speak about religion. However, even where one’s physical appearance is not a basis for the attack, women are

still excluded from the conversation based on their gender, especially when their opinions are not one that fit into the mainstream religious narrative. In Asiah’s case, some of the perpetrators resorted to demanding that the men in her family (her father and her husband) control her.



**Allah SWT telah menghalalkan poligami dn Rasulullah saw telah mengamalkannya..kamu siapa Asiah utk menyangah hukum Allah SWT..ragu2 dgn hukum Allah, mempertikai, apalgi menolak hukum Allah klaw menurut pendpt ulama Tauhid..kamu sudah murtad..taubatlah snlm terlambat...**

*Allah SWT has legitimised polygamy and Rasulullah saw has practised it..who are you Asiah to object the principle of Allah SWT...to doubt the principle of Allah, to argue, what more to reject Allah’s principle, by the opinion of Ulama Tauhid, you w[o]uld have been apostatised... repent before it is too late...*

**Jgn bg binit u main fb, suh dia jd mak2 sudah la..bg main fb ko tgk apa di up status, x malu ke bro?**

*Don’t let your wife ‘play’ Facebook, just ask her to be a mother..let her ‘play’ Facebook and look at what she said on her status, do you have any shame bro?*

**Isteri tuan terlalu pertikai hukum dalam Islam...harap di tegur segera supaya x jadi dayus**

*Your wife is arguing on principles of Islam..hope she will be reprimanded immediately so that you don’t become a dayus (an irresponsible man in the family who lets his wife run free).*

Women who exercise agency, influence and power on the internet are deemed to have transgressed morally and religiously of what is touted to be appropriate behaviour for women. Further, such *transgression* is deemed as a shame for the family and the failure of the husband and father in the family in performing their supposed roles and responsibility as male

authorities. The perpetrators' attacks on Asiah's husband are based on an oppressive notion of what masculinity is supposed to be, one that negatively affects people of all genders regardless.

#### 4.5.2 THE MUSLIM IDENTITY

Much of the narrative and language centred around the identity of a Muslim person and what being one entails. This reflects the purist approach to Islam and the Malay identity earlier alluded to based on the research findings of Riaz Hassan (2008). In many of the datasets collected, the perpetrators were defining and reinforcing the norms of the Muslim community, and at the same time, rejecting everything beyond the purist norms that they have embraced.

This is apparent in the attacks against #CampurLGBT:



I just wanted to say that the world are desperate to be a Muslim, while in Malaysia some of us are desperate to be a homosexuals. Hope all of Muslim understand what I just want to say. Take your part to prevent #CampurLGBT! Islam is the way of life

As Muslims, it's not good to support LGBT, but to not mocking or harassing them, it's a yes. We don't mock or harass them, we don't support LGBT either, but we do make friends with them. Only friends. Muslim Malaysians, please do know the value of those three things #CampurLGBT

Muslims who support LGBT were nothing but morons. It's already stated in the Koran about what was happened in Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't care about others. Go ahead with your secularism.

#CampurLGBT #tolakLGBT  
#PleaseRepent

In dictating how a Muslim or religious person should and should not think, behave or react, stories and experiences of those who do not conform are

effectively erased and their identities are made an outcast or an unusual aspect that ought to be prevented. Declan notes that "perpetrators seem to have difficulty to see the intersectionality of Muslim identity and their sexual orientation and gender identity, and political identity. To some, being LGBT simply means the person stopped praying or [is] sinning; and to some, it simply means LGBT and/or allies are trying to be 'open minded/ follow trend'".

Similarly, in Maryam's case, she was often attacked for transgressing her Muslim identity.



I am 1000 times more willing to be forced by my mom to wear hijab if that can bring me away from being burned in Neraka

Sis, if you want take off your hijab, then do so. But please don't make up excuses to deny Al-Quran in the process

You care about being rejected by the mosque, but not your Creator? Sudah-sudahlah cik Maryam. Cukuplah seek for attention dengan cara merendahkan maruah awak as a muslim, kesian muslim yang lain terpalit jugak dek kerana sifat ego bodoh sombong awak ni. Sudahlah.

*You care about being rejected by the mosque, but not your Creator? Whatever Miss Maryam. Enough with attention seeking by lowering your dignity as a Musli[m], pity the other Muslim who are affected by you because of your stupidity, ego and arrogance. Whatever.*

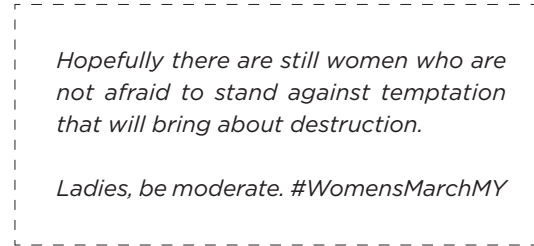
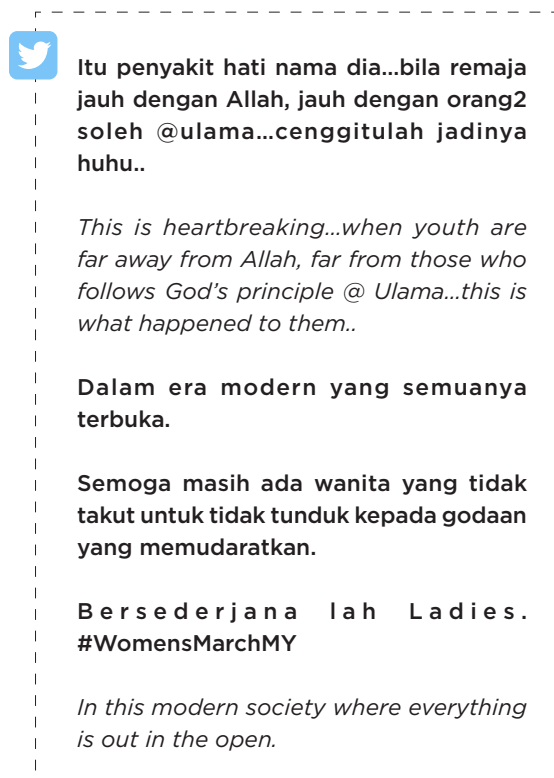
In addition, in the Ramadan incident, Maryam was caught in a lengthy conversation with a person widely known as a progressive Muslim, in which he alleged Maryam's action as defiance to the Islamic principle. Below is only a part of the conversation that took place on his Facebook page, which many of his supporters had later joined in the attack against Maryam.



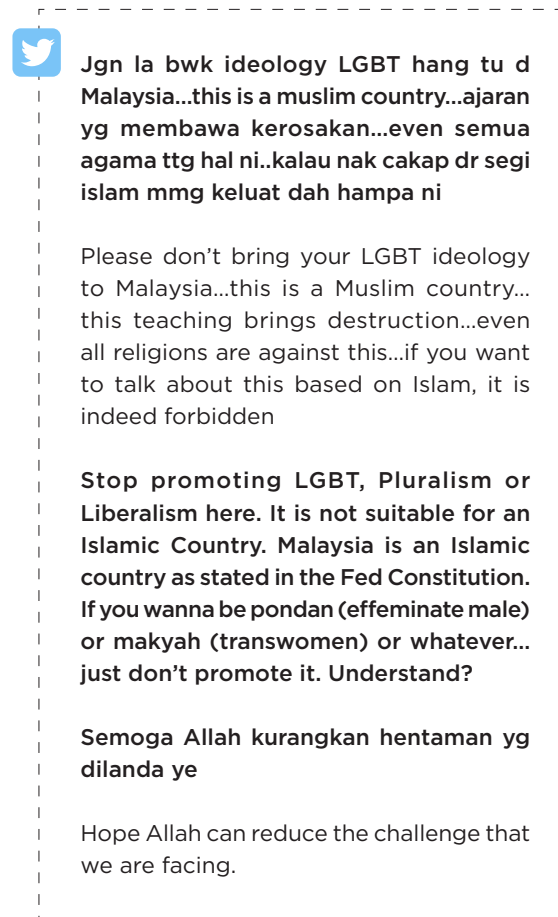
### 4.5.3 DANGER OF TRANSGRESSION

Perpetrators often associate visibility of women and LGBTQ people who challenge the heteronormative society and those who are vocal about women’s rights and gender equality as transgression that will bring about harm, disaster or the end of the world. With that, the women or the people in these incidents of attacks were discussed as an ideology, or disease or wabak (virus) that needs to be contained for the stability of society. “It is like dadah (drugs), you are the dadah, you are a thing, yang boleh dicegah (you can be prevented)”, says Waris.

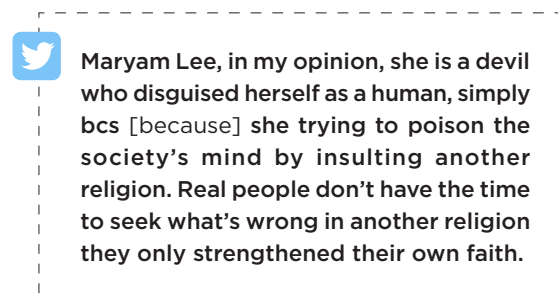
Example from #WomensMarchMY:



Some examples from #CampurLGBT:



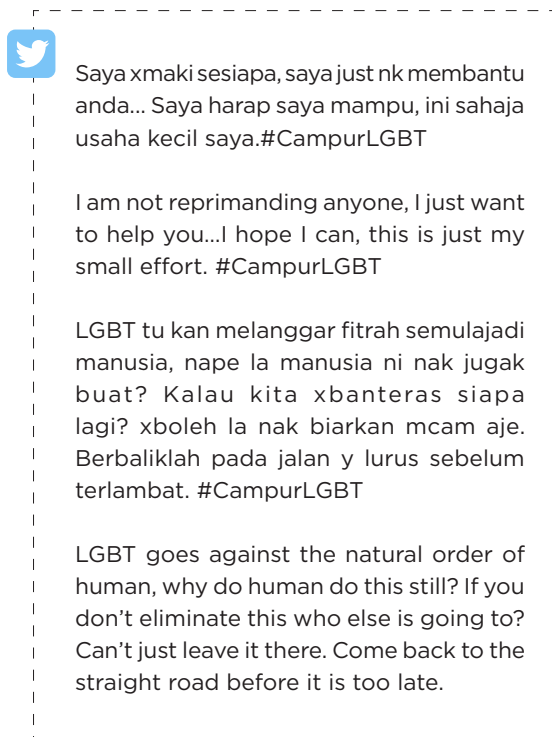
Some examples from Maryam:



#### 4.5.4 LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN

The following is specific to the context of #CampurLGBT. Many have come forward to call out violence against LGBT in Malaysia, whilst rejecting their sexual orientation and gender identity. This narrative is recent and has been gaining momentum and saw its height during #CampurLGBT. Referred to as the *'menyantuni* (to love or sympathise)' by many LGBT activists in Malaysia, the narrative calls for the public to care and give guidance to their fellow Muslims who "practise LGBT lifestyle and sinning".

Declan notes that @LGBTInsaf (LGBT Repent) is one newly created Twitter handle during the #CampurLGBT period, which uses the *'menyantuni*' narrative that is especially disconcerting for LGBT human rights activists. The Twitter handle also created a Telegram channel, advising the public to stop watching porn or otherwise they would be converted and become LGBT. Examples of the language and narratives used:



The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter post from the account @LGBTInsaf. The post is in Indonesian and discusses helping someone who is struggling with their faith and identity. It includes a blue Twitter bird icon and a dashed border around the text.

Saya xmaki sesiapa, saya just nk membantu anda... Saya harap saya mampu, ini sahaja usaha kecil saya. #CampurLGBT

I am not reprimanding anyone, I just want to help you...I hope I can, this is just my small effort. #CampurLGBT

LGBT tu kan melanggar fitrah semulajadi manusia, nape la manusia ni nak jugak buat? Kalau kita xbanteras siapa lagi? xboleh la nak biarkan mcam aje. Berbaliklah pada jalan y lurus sebelum terlambat. #CampurLGBT

LGBT goes against the natural order of human, why do human do this still? If you don't eliminate this who else is going to? Can't just leave it there. Come back to the straight road before it is too late.

#### 4.5.5. THE ALMIGHTY RELIGION

Certain expressions around religion carry with them an undertone of conclusiveness and authoritativeness, leaving very little room for further questions and

discussions. Any attempts to probe further would deem as a direct challenge to God or to the power of God. The sense of entitlement and authoritarianism are similar in justifying the violence and extremist views against women and LGBTQ people.

Sarah notes the challenge in separating the issue of sexual assault and religion during her exchange with her family on the alleged sexual assault by Tariq Ramadan. "It is so hard to sort of get them to not conflate these issues. It is not an issue that is so specific or unique to Islam, in this context, it happened to [be a] Muslim. But in any context, the issue is still sexual harassment, violence against women. But that's not something I think they can clearly distinguish because it is clearly very emotional. And it is a question of faith you know, in this situation", says Sarah.

One of the members in Sarah's chat group says:

**"my 2 cents worth. we Muslims are told to never expose peoples aib (shame) and certainly nobody should judge others. Only Allah can judge. I think in circumstances such as these maybe ulamas of the highest integrity should sit and decide".**

Sarah replies to the above by stating that this is not an issue for Ulama to decide but a societal and criminal issue. The member then ends the conversation, **"I don't want to talk at length about this, maybe we can discuss when we meet, I am not an authority on anything, only telling the little that I have learnt".**

The above example from Sarah's case also shows that people who perpetrate an extreme response may also default to a position of humility, pointing to others out there who are more learned than themselves, and are only sharing "the little that they have learnt/know", but simultaneously effectively ending any attempts for a healthier discourse on the issue. Doing so, also reinforces that only certain people can dispute issues that affect Muslims/followers/believers and Islam/religions, and only the shame of Muslims held in high esteem should not be made public or judged.

Some other examples from Victoria:



**Buat apa pening2 beza gender (budaya) vs jatina (biologi). Sang Pencipta dah bagi fitrah so ikut fitrah je la dengan berpandukan Wahyu2Nya.**

*Why trouble yourself by differentiated gender (culture) vs gender (biology). Your creator has given fitrah (creation) so just follow fitrah with His Wahyu (enlightment).*

**Its true but yr ideology is to make it to look ok or make it norm for ppl to choose wht gender they wanna be eventho celah kangkang lain. So u are provoke wht god are made for u. Mean u want to change/ fight wht god made for u n thts y ada dh mnusia nk jd binatg.ideology dajjal**

*It is true but your ideology is to make it norm for people to choose what gender they want even though what is in between their legs are different. So you are provoking what God made for you. Which means you want to change/fight what God has created for you and that's why there are humans who want to be animal. Deviant ideology*

**pertikai. Perincian ttg poligami pon disebut dgn jelas. Usah perjuangkan mengikut keterbatasan logic aqal semata-mata.**

*I don't agree. Which Qalam Allah did you falsify? Polygamy is clearly stated in Al-quran. There is no need to argue. Details on polygamy has been mentioned clearly. There is no need to fight based on your limited logical mind.*

**Ish...Takkan sampai nak kena hapuskan kot! Pi mintak izin daripada Allah dulu please..Tak baik main cancel2**

*Ish...not to the extend of abolishing it right! Go and get permission from Allah first please..Not good to play around with cancellation [eliminating what Allah/the Quran says].*

#### 4.6 GENERALISING FEMINISM

The generalisation, stereotyping and rejection of feminism is widespread and has been around long before the age of the internet. However, the internet makes rejecting and generalising feminism easier and more accessible. One tweet reads “I have nothing against #WomensMarchMY – until they bring feminism as their main course”.

Such common derisive taunts at feminists do not only come from the conservative or the public. It is a narrative that plagues many women’s rights advocates and feminists within the human rights movement too. In some instances, the concept of “gender equality” has been perceived negatively.

Yvonne who is known to be a feminist on her Twitter account, after calling out the article for its sexist remarks, was attacked by a Twitter handle managed by the same administrator for the blog that hosted the article:

Example from #WomensMarchMY:



**I can't stand with you for LGBT rights. My religion prevents it. Lemme rephrase that, My GOD prevents that and for good reason. Don't @ me. Al-Quran everywhere go read. #WomensMarchMY**

Some examples from Asiah:



**Aku tidak setuju. Qalam Allah mana yg kau dustakan? Dalam Al-quran jelas menyebut tentang poligami. Usah**

**'ism' people have no respect for human rights. Their perimeter of freedom of expression is where their misguided sense of offence lies.**



The effect of such is the complete dismissal of her commentary on the discriminatory nature of the article by the administrator of the blogsite. Because stereotypically speaking, a feminist is always angry and cannot take a joke. A distinction has to be drawn in punching down (mocking the less privileged, oppressed group) and punching up (aiming at the privileged, the status quo) and freedom of expression cannot justify punching down women through sexist language.

Therefore, it is important to look at such narratives and language to explore the unease and reluctance surrounding feminism and gender equality.

#### 4.6.1 THE STEREOTYPICAL FEMINIST

As soon as the word “feminist/feminism” is uttered, immediately opinions will be formed around one – that you are loud, emotional, ugly, fat, obnoxious, angry and other utterly bizarre assumptions. Such assumptions are made without paying the slightest attention to the substance of their voice and demands, effectively shutting down all forms of conversations and discussions. During #WomensMarchMY, ad hominem attacks were made against participants, with very little discussion on the actual demands of the march.<sup>54</sup>



**Benda macam ni yang korang patut fight, bukan fasal tak shave ketiak...tayang tits masa rally, lukis vagina everywhere in the streets, pakai baju dengan quote pelik pelik dan buat benda bodoh. Memang orang tak peduli lah apa perjuangan korang.**

*You should be fighting for things like this, not about whether to shave body hair or not...showing off your nipples during rally, draw vagina everywhere on the streets, where clothes with weird quotes and*

*do stupid things. That's why people are ignoring your fight.*

**It definitely can be shaken by fat ugly feminazi troll**

**Most girls at #WomensMarchMY #WanitaBangkit are fatties. Probably the 1% pretty ones there were brainwashed by their more dominant ugly friend.**

**Most if not all the guys there are beta male soyboys.**

**Perhimpunan feminis ni biasanya 10% ja yg lawa sopan santun. 80% gemok, pakaian cam gampang, huduh, gemok**

**10% geng terpaksa teman pasangan... kakhakhakah**

*Usually only 10% from this kind of feminist assembly are pretty and demure, 80% of them are fat and wear baggy clothes, ugly, fat.*

*10% are forced by their partners... kakhakhakah*

#### 4.6.2 WESTERN, HOLLYWOOD AGENDA

Despite the availability of resources on feminism in the local context online; despite the fact that the concept of feminism has been around historically and culturally in Malaysia long before the Western ideas and interpretation were introduced in our nation,<sup>55</sup> many still perceive feminism as a foreign agenda that is not suited to the culture and context of Malaysia. This in part is perhaps due to the over-representation of “feminism” by celebrities, pop culture (predominantly from Hollywood), beauty and fashion companies, which tend to have more power and reach in “marketing” their brand of feminisms to a global audience.

<sup>54</sup> The issues demanded during the march were, among others, migrant and domestic workers' rights; against domestic violence; against sexual and gender-based violence; for women's leadership; indigenous women's rights; LGBTIQ rights (including intersex people); for women's bodily autonomy; against biased trade agreements; for greater women's political participation and many, many more. Read more at: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/415389>

<sup>55</sup> Tengku Nur Qistina Petri, “Feminism is not a foreign concept”, New Straits Times, 4 June 2016, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/06/149623/feminism-not-foreign-concept>

Further, Sarah also opines that the language of feminism can be unfamiliar, “because the language doesn’t exist in Bahasa [the Malay language], the terms just have never been used before...it is translated, but in a very formal manner that doesn’t carry any meaning that they can relate to, and hence the stigmatisation of feminism being a western agenda, basically creating issue out of nothing”.

Example from Sarah:



**Unfortunately in the MeToo environment - any accusation by a woman is sufficient [to stigmatise the victim]. What more if you are an Islamist that has credentials on par or better than the Western liberals**

Some examples from #WomensMarchMY:



**Non-binary kepada hotak engkau..They are only 2 gender: Male and Female. Ini masalahnya kalau dah taksub sangat dengan Hollywood’s bullcraps..**

**Please resort to science and religion on this issue, not celebrities twitter feeds.**

*Non-binary your stupid brain..They are only 2 gender: Male and Female. This is the problem if you buy into Hollywood’s bullcrap..*

*Please resort to science and religion on this issue, not celebrities twitter feeds.*

**March for what? You’ve been duped by the media & Hollywood.**

**This #WomensMarchMY rally is a big joke. Today we can see that Malaysians are more likely to be influenced by the Western movement instead of focusing on the country’s major issue.**

The use of English language in the Malaysian gender equality discourse — #MeToo, non-binary, #WomensMarchMY — has the unfortunate effect

of reinforcing the alien concept of feminism and gender equality in this country. In the #MeToo instance, women’s rights organisations have long been advocating for the Protection against Sexual Harassment Bill and organising various campaigns to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment in women’s everyday lives. Yet, it has never garnered the attention as wide and as far as the #MeToo movement, which was started by an actress based in the United States and subsequently localised and personalised by women and allies all around the world.

#### **4.6.3 THE DAMAGE OF FEMINISM TO SOCIETY**

The other narrative found is the misconception of feminism as damaging to society, for shaking social values to its core and for changing things that are working perfectly well for the powerful and privileged groups in society.

Example from Sarah:



**The men have successful painted “feminism” as the liberation of the female species so much so many women fell for this deceit n only ended demeaning themselves to the low. The respect that they sought for doesn’t bring them ‘equality’ but a confusion of their role. Women, and of late (men) too are used as a bait to tarnished reputations of many a good people. It’s a big trial for them but for believers it’s a sign from Allah to move forward to a greater outcome which would benefit the person as well as the Ummah. Wallahu’alam.**

Some examples from #WomensMarchMY:



**3rd wave feminism craps have landed on our shores. This is going to be a big mess in our society if it’s left untreated. Get your medication at the nearest mental illness institute today!**

Nope, I will always go against feminism. What they want is chaos. Order must be preserved.

Interest of majority over the demand of minorities.

Some have simply defended the status quo and believed that a system that benefits the majority should be maintained:



Most of us enjoy watching minorities (those who uphold feminism are small in number) struggling in vain.

There are huge number of people living just fine under the so called "patriarchal system"

Only a handful of people who claim otherwise.

So we know the one that is problematic are these people, not the system.

#### 4.6.4 MEN HATERS AND ANTI-MEN

Feminism, distilled down to its absolute core, is about gender equality, wherein a person's gender will not restrict them from equal access to opportunities in life. Yet, the categorisation of feminism as men-hating or anti-men remains a prevailing narrative in instances of online SGBV. Instead of dealing with the issue of discrimination and male privilege, such sensationalised narratives have the effect of turning the table and putting the oppressed groups on the defensive.

Some examples from #WomensMarchMY:



Let's look at it from the other side: not enough women because of discrimination or because lack of interest/qualification?

From my pov, the fight is always blaming men, patriarchy. Almost like women have no flaws except for those who shun this new brand of feminism

\*a woman hit her husband\*

Feminist: YEAY! GO GIRL! YOU'RE QUEEN!

\*a guy hit his wife\*

Feminist: THERES NO REASON TO HIT A WOMAN! THIS IS SO WRONG!

Feminist in the nutshell, guys.

Tak suke patriaki tapi mengadu kat kj. Bergantung pada lelaki juga.

Feminist and their allies are pathetic.

*Do not like patriarchy but complain to KJ (the then Minister for Youth and Sport). Dependent on men too.*

*Feminist and their allies are pathetic.*

Sesudah mandi. Ke cermin.

Mencuba pelbagai teknik solekan untuk menutup kecelaan dibahagian muka. Gagal. Terasa membazir memborong di Watson tempoh hari. Lalu dia persetankan semuanya dan berikrar bahawa men are trash secara tiba-tiba.

Maka lahirlah seorang feminist

*After shower. Go to the mirror.*

*Try every make up tactic to cover the flaw on her face.*

*Fail. Felt like time wasted shopping at Watson today. She then threw everything away and swear that men are trash suddenly.*

*Here comes the birth of a feminist.*

#### 4.6.5 “WOMEN ALREADY HAVE RIGHTS”

Many who attack those vocal about women’s rights and gender equality have also argued that “women already have rights and equality” and there is no need to call for reforms or to rally. The asserted rights in such instances are often measured based on the individual woman’s ability to achieve autonomous personhood and economic wellbeing. In many of the narratives, it is assumed that a woman has rights when they have access to tertiary education, able to secure a job and are earning for themselves. Without discounting the importance of women’s individual economic achievements, in many cases, such narratives leave out many of those in the marginalised groups and completely disregard the systemic sexism and gender-based discrimination in everyday life.

On its own, such narratives appear to be *harmless*, but in instances of online SGBV, they serve as a *real life testimony* that further validate narratives of extremists and misogynists.

During #WomensMarchMY, many have claimed that they do not need feminism because they or the women around them have a job and are earning decent wages.



**My mother currently work as high rank officer in a ministry. She is one of the decision maker and the think tanker and most of her colleagues are female..from that, I can safely conclude that women are treated as fair as men n given the same opportunity. Plus, we havnt heard the train coach for male and ministry for men..**

**Perempuan ramai di universiti. Doktor guru ramai perempuan. Gaji kalau government confirm dah sama je**

*There are many girls in university. Doctor, teacher, plenty of them are girls. Salary in the government sector are equal among gender.*

**Even as a woman, I don’t know how to relate to this #WomensMarchMY? Well I try to think whether I have been discriminated to pursue my education, securing scholarship & job. But so far I**

**don’t feel any. I think in Malaysia both gender got a quite a fair chance.**

**Masalah gender inequality kat Malaysia ni mmg dahsyat sangat ke sampai kena ade #WomensMarchMY?**

*Is gender inequality in Malaysia so terrible to the extend where we need a #WomensMarchMY?*

**Women can apply any job they want, no rules saying they cant except underground work.**

**There you have it equal opportunity. No issues.**

#### 4.7 REPORTING TO THE AUTHORITIES

Some of the tweets and comments would flag public authorities or call for law enforcers to take action against women, LGBTQ people and allies who express the need for gender equality or who defend the need for gender equality. Regardless whether action was taken against the respondents, underlying these narratives are a conviction of the attackers that their righteous political rage and extremist views towards these women, LGBTQ people and allies are backed by the State.



Mar 15  
Ds mohon ambil tindakan mengenai isu lgbt. Perkuatkan hukum syariah kita supaya activist2 lgbt ni semua tak menonjol. Sekeras-kerasnya tolak #CampurLGBT

*Datuk Seri, please take issue about this LGBT issue. Strengthen our Syariah law so that these LGBT activists are not so visible. Reject #CampurLGBT as strong as you can*

To all netizen... please report & block @mrymler.

To Jakim, jabatan agama islam negeri, pihak berkuasa please ambik tindakan kpd dia ni. Kalau dia sakit otak please hantar ke hospital a.s.a.p.

Translate from Indonesian



*To all netizen...please report & block @mrymler.*

*To Jakim, State Islamic Department and authorities, please take action against her. If her brain is sick, please send her to hospital a.s.a.p.*

**Seek help, u really need it**

**Also pulis mana pulis asal tak tangkap dia ni?**

*Seek help, you really need it.*

*Also police, why aren't the police arresting her?*

#### 4.8 VICTIM NARRATIVES

Incidents of online SGBV are not spared from the perfect victim narrative, which in turn then sets off presumptions about who counts as a victim, and how someone is supposed to behave to be seen as credible. Victims of online SGBV are constantly scrutinised for their credibility and are subjected to an endless quest for “evidence” of the violence. What

comes with that is a presumption that the experiences of these victims are not sufficiently terrifying or it is a result of their perceived provocative voice/action.

Yvonne’s commentary on the sexist nature of the blog was trivialised and dismissed as playing the victim card, even when she had not claimed herself to be a victim in the exchange:

**Some activists are actually grievance collectors. They feel validated when they feel victimised about something.**

During #WomensMarchMY, women’s rights organisations, feminists and allies had loosely organised among themselves to report certain tweets with content that were physically violent and oppressive in nature. Perpetrators have capitalised on that by dismissing such acts as trivial:

The feminist and male feminist want to fight the system, but when the system retaliate, they go screaming play victim. Pathetic. #WomensMarchMY

Maryam too is not spared from such narratives:



**Dah tau orang Malaysia macam tu kau saja provoke makan depan orang ramai. Lepas kena tegur tulis dekat Facebook. Well plays Mrym Lee.**

*Already know that Malaysian are like this and yet you provoke them by eating in public. After you are reprimanded, you write about it on Facebook. Well played Mrym Lee.*

**Buat provokasi kemudian play victim.**  
Provoke and then play victim.

**Buat provokasi**  
**Kena maki, kena kecam**  
**Acah-acah jadi mangsa kekerasan.**

**Lepas tu, ulang lagi lepas ni.  
Stupid moron!!**

*Provocate  
Got reprimanded, got threatened  
Claimed to be a victim of violence  
After that, repeat it again.  
Stupid moron!!*

#### 4.9 CONCLUSION

Extremist, misogynist and sexist narratives are proliferated through the internet and social media, and in turn help to maintain and re-impose the status quo and the gender-power hierarchy in everyday life. This is nothing new as history has shown that this silencing of women's voices and the promotion of a particular masculinity is central to centuries of violence against women and LGBTQ people, but because violence against women has been so normalised, it is not seen as extremism. For example, rape crimes during war is seen as part and parcel of the violence of war, a way to emasculate the enemy (usually men at war), rather than a form of extremism. Perpetrators in the research respondents' cases acted with a firm conviction that they are entitled to humiliate, punish, shame, silence, and violate women and LGBTQ people; and some spoke of their acts of violence as a human right (as in freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of religion or belief, and so on).

The amount of everyday extremism and aggression that happens to women and LGBTQ people are startling and pervasive that it modifies how we live and think. The normalisation of SGBV has rendered any attempts to speak up against SGBV dangerous. In all the cases here, all respondents were abused and harassed for wanting gender equality, and so are those who come in the defence of the respondents. The following screen shots show how a Twitter user was bullied for defending #WomensMarchMY and was told by the perpetrators to delete the original comment.



*Hi human, here's a thing, try to read more if you can't see the experience right in front of your eyes. My aunt, she is well-educated, a DOCTOR and asked to work at emergency department but was not accepted because she is a woman, they said in case she got pregnant, troublesome. Try to understand ok*



*Have you ever worked at Emergency? Do you know the amount of radiation from portable x-ray and its impact on foetus?*

*From her tweet she did mentioned it was her aunt. I guess her aunt didn't tell her that. But again...*

*How superficial right? Ignorance at its finest.*

*She can delete her tweet.*

*Waiting for her to delete, the longer she left the tweet there, the more stupid she looks*

These perpetrators, in the example above, were deliberate in ignoring the fact that her aunt is a doctor and would know about any potential risks to herself if she works at the Emergency Ward.

These narratives point to a culture of misogyny and extremism that is growing in strength. There is an undertone of entitlement, authoritarianism and supremacism in the above-mentioned narratives employed to attack the stories, views and lived realities of women and LGBTQ people. While not everyone may be prone to violent extremism (and manifestation of violent extremism was less apparent in the above-mentioned case studies), it is this culture that normalises extremism which renders misogynist, extremist and hate-based narratives acceptable, tolerable and relatable that makes the environment conducive for violent extremism, a hint of it was witnessed in the chase down of a few participants of the women's march in Kuala Lumpur in March 2018. The existence of such highly visible and state-sponsored extremist ideology lays a fertile ground for violent extremism to thrive. An extremist ideology (as with the narratives and language shown above) strives to annihilate the experiences and views of those deemed unequal to the dominant status quo, and violent extremism is an inevitable physical manifestation of the intention of such an ideology.

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# CHAPTER 5: AN ALTERNATIVE CONCLUSION



For generations, the State and society, and now the internet and technology, have been normalising an extreme form of patriarchy built on the foundation of a toxic interpretation of masculinity and gender roles. This is done not only at the cost of the rights and freedom of women and LGBTQ people, but also at the risk of disrupting the peace in societies. It offers no alternative discursive space for those who do not conform to heteronormative and stereotyped gender roles and responsibilities; it shames, silences and cannibalises the stories and identities of those who are different; it gives permission to society to humiliate, discriminate, alienate, attack and hurt; it espouses the absence of empathy in those who believe in an extreme form of patriarchy. When *the other* is dehumanised, they are seen as an 'it', 'a nasty woman', a 'feminazi', 'an angry woman', deprived of humanity, the stage is set for any direct physical violence, whether online (threats of physical harm, ostracisation, and so on) and offline.

The link between violent extremism and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), whether committed in the name of religion or social norms, is striking in the cases compiled in this research. 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; and women and gender non-conforming people are deemed inferior, dependant and incapable of exercising their own agency. In addition, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators are men where the motives of these attacks are always about perseverance and restorative of the status quo, and to silence all discourse demanding for change and gender equality. In all cases, extremist narratives and actions seek to roll back the hard-fought gains women and LGBTQ people have made in the struggle for human rights, non-discrimination and gender equality.

The most important finding of the study was that violent extremism can be described as a mere physical manifestation of extremist and misogynist ideologies that are sustained, reproduced and reinforced through a range of everyday aggression

played out in our language, behaviour and practices. Violent extremism begins with the dangerous process of normalising extremist ideologies. The cases compiled in this research show that the normalised extremist viewpoint has rendered discourse around gender equality, feminism and women's rights alien, unacceptable and unnatural. An extremist ideology denies the stories and identities of those who challenge the dominant status quo and inevitably necessitate violence as a tool to achieve its ends – the removal of person or groups perceived as a threat to the status quo. It provides a plausible defence or a reason for society to sympathise with those who perpetrate violence.<sup>56</sup>

In keeping with the above, it is important to note that violent extremism is not at all isolated from our everyday lives. The seeds of violent extremism starts with family upbringing, religious teaching by our neighbourhood mosque, temples, church etc. that reinforces women's inferiority to men, school textbooks that show boys as doctors and girls as teachers, to the low representation of women in our parliament, discrimination against pregnant women at workforce, the policing of women's bodies, denying Muslim fathers to be fathers even when they want to take responsibility for their Muslim child who was conceived or born out of wedlock and give their child their name, and blaming the woman or girl-child for getting raped and much more.

It is a scenario that harms not only women and LGBTQ people, but also men who do not embrace the rigid forms of masculinity or gender roles. The implications of all this are far-reaching and at the cost of a peaceful and harmonious society. Our solution to violent extremism should not be rigidly confined to manifestation of a public act of violence or terrorism. Violent extremism begins at home and hence the solution should start by interrogating our culture, governance structure, laws and regulations, and most importantly the way we perceive gender roles and responsibilities, expectations and identities

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<sup>56</sup> In Maryam's case, she is "deserving of violence" for her perceived behaviour of provoking Muslims.

and how we verbalise that; the way we raise our next generation; and about the way we conduct our everyday lives, that is, if our human rights principles and values translate effectively as such into everyday practices and actions.

We need to think about building a society that is resilient towards extremist ideologies and SGBV. The research shows that a truly resilient society is one that promotes gender equality, celebrates the legitimacy of diversity in genders and viewpoints and is premised on principles to live by, preferably human rights and feminist principles.

Despite the unwelcomed online SGBV, the internet and technology has been pivotal to the monumental strides in advancing human rights achieved by the women's and LGBTQ rights movements. Undoing the framework of oppression and violent extremism is not the work of one project or one generation. It is a continual process of unlearning and learning; of deconstructing and reconstructing a safe(r), braver and peaceful world for everyone. The respondents, in our study, are among individuals who understand the importance of bringing forth alternative narratives and the stories of women and LGBTQ people. They refuse to be silenced. They are supported, online and offline, by allies who demand for gender equality. When we stand in solidarity, build collectives and movements, we are at a momentous cultural shift to open the door even wider for a tolerant and accepting world.



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