

# THE OTHER WITHIN: MUSLIM RIGHTS WARRIOR IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I reflect on debates about Islams and feminisms by re-centering a class-based analysis of women's activism and gender politics and re-emphasising the local self-positioning of women activists who are committed to Muslim women's movements for self-determination and social justice. I do so by considering the lived realities of working class Malay Muslim women activists in urban Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who suggest that normative understandings of feminist ideals and feminist activists fail to capture the way they conceive of and do activism specific to their class location and local context. I argue that these activists' contextualised self-positioning opens up a more meaningful space to rethink the designations "Muslim feminist" or "Islamic feminist," often associated with women in communities of Muslims who are engaging in political struggles to reintegrate understandings of Islam with contemporary conceptions of justice and equality.

**Keywords:** feminism, women activists, muslim women, gender justice, social class, gender politics

## Introduction

Debates on the politics of naming women who strive for equality - and justice oriented interpretations of Islam as "Muslim feminist" or "Islamic feminist" have generated competing, yet fruitful, scholar-activist analyses (for example, see Abou-Bakr 2001; Badran 2009; Barlas 2008; cooke 2000; Moghadam 2002; Tohidi 2001; wadud 2010). For the sake of brevity, I will not rehash the exciting and multilayered theorising of these analyses; suffice it to say that there are convincing arguments for embracing, negotiating, and rejecting the categories of "Muslim feminist" or "Islamic feminist." As I have argued

elsewhere, I am cautious about qualifying the rich tapestry of Muslim women's passion and commitment to gender justice under these categories, given the need for women activists to retain their desired cultural legitimacy within the context of postcolonial struggles (Basarudin 2016). My caution is also related to how feminism has served as the handmaiden of colonialism (Ahmed 1992) and has aided in the expansion of the U.S Empire and imperialist projects through a saviour mission (Abu-Lughod 2002).

In this reflection paper, I revisit my encounters with three young Malay women activists who were members of Sisters in Islam (hereafter SIS), a non-governmental organisation of professional Muslim women committed to the promotion of an Islam that "recognises the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and dignity within a democratic nation state" ([www.sistersinislam.org.my](http://www.sistersinislam.org.my)) to re-center a class-based analysis of women's activism and gender politics and to re-emphasise the local self-positioning of these activists. I consider the lived realities of women activists to problematise normative understandings of feminist ideals and feminist activists, which sometimes fail to capture the way these women conceive of and do activism in a way that is specific to their class location and local context. I contend that these activists' contextualised self-positioning opens up a more meaningful space to rethink the debates of feminisms and Islams and the designation "Muslim feminist/Islamic feminist" often associated with elite and upper-and-middle class Muslim women engaging in political struggles to reintegrate understandings of Islam with contemporary conceptions of justice and equality.

I would like to note a caveat. Given the small sample that I am working with - I interviewed about 15 working class women but chose to focus on the narratives of three of them - I am not suggesting that this sample represents the unified voice of a particular social class. Rather, I draw attention to these class-based narratives of feminism and feminist activism because these narratives interrupt a standard depiction of the "Muslim feminist" or "Islamic feminist" as beneficiary of particular class politics and move beyond contextualised histories.

### **Narratives of the Other Within**

I came to know Iza, Nadiah, and Suhaila when I conducted preliminary fieldwork with SIS a few years before my in-depth ethnographic research that began in 2006. After leaving the field in 2007, we kept in touch via email and sometimes met up during my visits to Malaysia. Iza is in her early thirties, while Nadiah and Suhaila are in their mid-twenties. These women were all educated locally and are more comfortable conversing in the

national language, Malay, rather than English, which is the dominant language of many rights-oriented, non-governmental organisations in Malaysia. With the exception of Iza, the other two women wear *tudung*, a colourful Malaysian headscarf. They were raised in working class homes in various areas on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur and their families can be considered conventional in that they practice strictly gendered division of labour inside the home and view suitable work for women outside the home as an extension of their gendered responsibilities and biological destiny: for example, nurse, secretary, teaching. As such, working in an office is considered suitable; however, the parents of these women are somewhat unaware of the controversial nature of SIS's advocacy and the extent of their daughters' activism with SIS.

These women activists come from families whose understanding and practice of Islam mirrors the views of the majority of Malay Muslims who believe that only the *ulama* (religious scholars), that is, those who are learned in Islamic sciences and jurisprudence, and trained in Islamic institutions revered by Muslims (for example, Al-Azhar) in the Middle East or South Asia, have the authority to engage in Islamic discourse (see Basarudin 2016). These women spoke about their relationship to Islam in terms of their knowledge prior to and after working with SIS. In our discussions through the years Iza, Nadiah, and Suhaila articulate their varying respective relationships to Islam and they all expressed that they came into political consciousness of feminist ideals through their work with SIS. Hence, their formative period of understanding debates about feminisms and Islams took place within the context of an organisation that is decidedly feminist in its orientation, in contrast to the socio-political context of their upbringing and environment that often associates feminist ideals with Westernisation and imperialism, thus equating feminist activists as corrupted by the West and trying to infiltrate Muslim communities with secular ideas. It is also through their work with SIS that these activists are exposed to the core ideals of feminism, its historical struggles, and its meanings. They are aware of the notion of homegrown feminism, that feminism is organic and its usage and application can be context specific, and that this allows for it to be embraced by varying activists.

In our conversations about the rights of Muslim women and the contemporary challenges facing Muslims, there was a recurring topic: feminism and Islam, and the labelling or representation of activists as Muslim feminists or Islamic feminists. All three women strongly distanced themselves from such labelling. Compared to many women's and human rights activists in Malaysia, who are of the elite or middle-and upper middle classes, these three women belong to a different social class, which sharpens the divide between the ways in which they practice gender politics and do activism. Who, for instance, gets to

define women's rights and women's interests? How do notions of equality and justice translate across social class? How does reform through legal means impact women's lives across class? How is class privilege reproduced in the framing of women's rights through a feminist ideology? In the narratives that follow, I sketch how Iza, Nadiyah, and Suhaila's experiences and lived realities speak to the ways that they conceive of and do activism specific to their class positioning and local context.

### **The "F" Word**

Iza is tall with wavy, shoulder length hair and a spirited personality. She was raised in a low-income family in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. For as long as Iza could remember, her parents held two jobs each to make ends meet and there was never enough time for them to spend together or for them to focus on her religious education. When asked about how Islam factored into her life while growing up, Iza suggested that her parents are "bukanlah alim sangat" (not that religious), which she clarified as "tak solat lima kali sehari, ibu tak pakai tudung, dan tak tahu banyak sangat pasal hukum hakam agama" (did not pray five times a day, mother did not wear the headscarf, and did not know a lot about religion). In turn, she felt no pressure to wear the headscarf or observe prayer. Religion, said Iza, is best left to religious scholars who have the "necessary knowledge." However, her work with SIS shifted her understanding of Islam; she developed a passion for understanding ways to "unread patriarchy" from the Qur'an (Barlas 2002) and for a deeper knowledge about the political struggle for justice and equality. Over the years that I have gotten to know Iza, I have seen how she has hungered for and accumulated knowledge about issues of gender and Islam, and has redefined herself as an activist invested in the struggle to untangle Islam from its androcentric legacy.

Comfortable in her skin as a working-class Malay activist, Iza articulates the complexities of qualifying her activist stance as a Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist:

I raised my own consciousness through working with SIS and studying to better myself as a woman and as a believer. Knowing my rights is an unparalleled act of devotional piety. I believe that the basic idea of revelation is that women and men are equal in the eyes of Allah. If I am equal before Allah, any inequality comes from men's (or women's) desire for power and control. I understand that a feminist is someone who speaks out against discrimination and inequality. And what I do is exactly that but I don't call myself a feminist, let alone a Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist. The reason? It's a luxury and it is more of the province of Malay women such as SIS's founding members. They are educated, speak English well, comfortable with that label, and can easily use it without it

clashing with who they are. People like me with a different [class] background find this word “feminist” or “F” word as a bit too jarring. It is like branding – desirable yet restrictive. It’s just not me and not a word that I feel fits me or who I am. I might share the same goals as other women in this organisation for gender justice but my priorities and the process of coming to that goal are different.

While I can see why my activism to educate others about Islam’s equality and justice can be seen as feminist, I am an activist in a country where attempts to question men’s dominance over Islam brands me a feminist or heretic, courtesy the Western world’s political games and demonisation of Islam. Why would I want to embrace the “F” word? I cannot be effective as a Muslim activist by branding myself feminist because of how the word has been used and how it is understood in Malaysia. Why do I want to discredit my own activism by putting the “F” word in front of Islam? What I do is in the name of Islam, so why do I have to distract people by putting feminist in front of it? I find knowledge and strength from Islam, so why should I find a more suitable way to label it? Why do I need a word that even when translated into Malay does not sound right on my tongue?

For Iza, her class background and the socio-political context of Malaysia make it undesirable to claim the label of Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist. She elaborated on her class background and how the “F” word makes her uncomfortable because it does not fit with her values. While she is aware of how many Muslim activists claim the label Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist for themselves, she views it as mainly an exercise of class privilege. It is class privilege that allows certain women to be comfortable with such labelling because of their upward mobility, opportunities to travel, and their cosmopolitan outlook and life choices. She suggests that class privilege protects these women and does not make their claim to feminism as unfamiliar-sounding as it does in her social class.

Moreover, she expressed that while she shares the goals of gender justice for Muslim women, she sees the attainment of those goals for women of her social class to mean something different than what it means for women of higher socioeconomic class – having job security, being able to afford childcare, access to contraception, and having the time to take English classes to improve opportunities for employment. These, says Iza, are not the goals of the gender justice movement, or the work of SIS, for example. Legal reform in Muslim family law, she argues, would only benefit women in so far as they have an understanding of the legal system and the class backing to even seek legal assistance. Iza vocalises that her view of feminist identity is a minority view in SIS, and tries not to publicise her viewpoint, so as to avoid unpleasantness or conflict. While realising that emphasising commonalities across differences is necessary in order to move towards social

transformation, Iza upholds that the struggle for Muslim women's rights needs to be attentive to class differences. She sees the politics of naming as one example of how such differences can be acknowledged and incorporated, and not silenced.

### **Exclusive Club and Ticket out of Islamicville**

Nadiah is a soft-spoken and petite young girl who wears colourful tudung that perfectly matches her clothes. I still marvel at the extensive collection of tudung that she once showed me, with its variety of colours, textures, and patterns. The only daughter in a family of four boys, Nadiah was raised in a working class family. Her father used to be a teacher and is now an imam in their village, while her mother is a housewife. Her parents, said Nadiah, made sure their children were provided with ample religious education to guide them through life's challenges. She had a strict upbringing and her parents are "alim, solat tak tinggal, puasa, dan rajin mengaji Qur'an" (religious, never miss prayers, fast during Ramadan, recite the Qur'an regularly). Since everyone in her village wore some form of head covering and her parents encouraged her to do so in high school, Nadiah took it on without thinking much about it. She also never paid much attention to her faith. When she joined SIS, she was exposed to diversity in Islamic thought, the contextual interpretation of religious sources, and so forth, and through this exposure she became more interested in the question of Muslim women's rights.

Nadiah sees a conflict in trying to reconcile the knowledge she had of Islam prior to joining SIS with her understanding of her own faith that is now strongly tied to the question of gender equality. On the one hand, she values her newfound knowledge, but finds it difficult to share with her parents, stating that she does not know how to phrase it in a manner that would translate into their working-class world where survival issues take precedence over practices of gender equality or justice. She also grapples with the representational politics of the term "Muslim feminist" or "Islamic feminist," particularly with respect to the comfort that many in SIS have, and encourage others to have, with this identification. Nadiah explains,

Since working with SIS, I have come to a better understanding of my rights as a Muslim woman. I know now why some people think that Islam is empowering for women but I also understand the problem of trying to make empowering practices a part of people lives. It's good enough for me for now to know my rights in Islam. I am using that knowledge to educate others. By learning about Islam I am empowering myself. Knowledge is power, as a wise woman once told me! [laughs] I think it is easy to slip into thinking about this powerful knowledge that I have as feminist knowledge because my fellow activists and

many of [SIS] founding members relate their knowledge to feminism. This is because they are highly educated and they have a different class background and family culture. Identifying as a feminist or relating their Islamic knowledge to feminism is natural to them. It's very class related – you have a way of being in this world and moving in and out of different social spaces that lower class people don't. They are fluent in English and do not struggle with how to speak or think in this language. With privilege you have more leeway to experiment with ideas. You have a different prism to see things. This is not a privilege that I have.

The basic argument [for those identifying as a Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist] is that Islam and feminism share the same ideals. But it does not make sense for me to see it that way. Islam empowers me. It frees me to know who I am. It lets me be who I am - a girl from a working-class family who is striving for upward mobility. Feminism was not even a concept that existed when Islam was revealed. Maybe it was an idea close to it but I doubt it. Society back then was hierarchical and male-centric. So I see my activist work as rooted in Islam and Islamic ideas of justice and piety. I don't see the need to call myself Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist. It makes it sound like an exclusive club. Moreover, given the work that we do in advocating for reform in law and public policies, what benefit does association with the ideas of feminism and identifying as a feminist, even Muslim or Islamic feminist, have in furthering our goals or making it easier for us to convince people or the government of the need for equitable laws? People are already suspicious that Western think tanks and governments fund our advocacy. Saying that we are feminist is the fastest ticket out of Islamic.

Similar to Iza, Nadiah also cites class politics as a marker of comfort with the label of Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist. Based on the conversations I had with Nadiah, I did not notice any envy that her fellow activists are able to easily claim these labels to represent themselves. I did not even detect a longing to inhabit such positioning. Rather, what I discovered was more of an exercise in the need for such labeling to incorporate her concerns as a working class young Malay woman aspiring for upward mobility. For instance, she brought up the debates on the headscarf and how she feels sidelined as someone who is not necessarily truly “liberated” because she chooses to wear it. She also wears the baju kurung, a modest Malay national long dress and skirt because it is affordable and she is comfortable in it. However, she feels that this attire does not translate into “what a feminist looks like,” based on the occasional comments that she receives from her fellow SIS activists who normally wear such attire solely for formal events or meetings with state officials. Nadiah recalls this ‘exclusive club,’ the double standard of self-determination,

which applies to those seeking gender equality but not so much to those choosing to wrap themselves in the visible signs of modesty. Here, Nadiah is calling into question the class politics and privilege that enables one to seamlessly move in and out of spaces and social identities, in tandem with the claiming of a cosmopolitan identity of Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist.

### **Simplifying Commitments**

Iza first introduced me to Suhaila, who has a great sense of humor and is a vocal activist. Similar to Iza and Nadiah, Suhaila was also raised in a working-class family. Her parents own a small sundry shop in their village and she has two siblings. Most of the women in her family wear the headscarf and she took it on when she was in her late teens. When she was growing up, her parents made sure that she attended Qur'an classes at their village mosque twice a week. Her religious teacher, an Ustat, was kind and generous, but as with many in Malaysia and in the Muslim world, she learned the Qur'an by rote and did not understand the meanings of the verses or the larger message of the Qur'an. It was not until she started working with SIS that she was able to appreciate and learn about Islam and women's rights. Suhaila's parents are happy that she has an office job with a decent wage and hope that she can move up in the organisation or move on to a more lucrative job once she has adequate work experience, so that she can better support the family. They know that she works for a "Muslim women's group" but do not really understand (or care to know, according to her) about her work with SIS. It was with SIS that she started reading literature about feminism and its historical development. She also learned about the historical and political dimensions of Islam and started discussing Muslim women's roles and contributions throughout history that she had been unaware of:

Working with SIS is eye opening on every level. I feel that my life is richer and more meaningful because now I can better understand the religion that I was born into. Before SIS I just read the Qur'an and had no interest in it because I didn't even know what I was reciting. Now I have a better idea. I don't know everything because I am still learning but what I now know makes me feel better as a Muslim. I am also learning about this feminist and feminism business and I find it fascinating. I think it's great ideology and has a nice history behind it as well.

I do see some similarities between ideas of feminism and Islam, or the Islam that I am learning through SIS. But for me, as someone who was raised in a low-income family, while feminism is a fun concept to think about (aside from its usefulness), it's not something I can easily relate to, or that I can relate the work I do to. It's different for upper class women who have lived in the city all their life, have certain levels of education, have



traveled, and have exposure to things that I never had access to. It's like this: I come from a social class that makes me conscious of who I am within this new urban environment. I never had the privilege to travel beyond my village and the farthest I have been is to leave my village to work in the city. I am aware of the many inadequacies that I have and I am working to better myself.

Much of the strength I have now is based on the new knowledge I have about Islam. So, I draw my strength from my faith. I don't see it as feminist Islam or Islamic feminist or any other label. These labels do not "add value or make it better." Does saying that I am an Islamic feminist or Muslim feminist make my knowledge about Islam more credible? If so, to whom? You know the political climate we work in. How would this label impact my activism? Is this label supposed to make me appear more sophisticated? Again, to whom? What is important to me is that I am educating Muslim women to know they can exercise choice in understanding Islam, allowing them to claim that knowledge for empowerment and carry it forward. Naming myself as a Muslim feminist or Islamic feminist and my activism as Islamic feminism simplifies my commitment to both Allah and our convictions for justice.

Suhaila's narrative evokes Iza and Nadiah's expressions of the ways in which their class-based understanding of activism and lived realities shape their worldview and their stance on the politics of naming and the ways that it is misaligned with their self-positionings. Suhaila also expressed discomfort over the manner in which women's rights is articulated through the limiting lens of feminist ideology in spite of its Islamic leanings, such as the concept of equality and how that concept translates differently according to social class and education background. She cites the example of a fellow middle class activist who views equality as the absolute and uncontestable right of women to be equal to men in all aspects. Suhaila says she does not want to be equal to men because she is different; equality for her is for her husband to share the double burden of housework, but for her colleague, equality is for her not to do the housework but for her husband to assume that burden instead. Another fellow activist suggested that her husband pay her for the housework and for Suhaila this is the luxury of those of the upper and middle classes, who can afford to be creative about how to spread the burden because they have hired help in the home. Meanwhile, she and her husband are trying to make ends meet and support their families.

## **Conclusion**

In this brief reflection paper, I suggest that it is necessary to consider a class-based analysis of women's activism and gender politics, as well as the local self-positioning of women activists, for a more holistic understanding of how normative understandings of feminist ideals and feminist activists fail to capture the ways that working class women activists conceive of and do activism in a local context. By centering the lived realities of working class Malay Muslim women activists in urban Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I suggest that these activists' contextualised self-positioning opens up a more meaningful space to rethink the designations of "Muslim feminist" or "Islamic feminist" that are often associated with elite, middle-and upper-class women in postcolonial Muslim contexts. These activists are exposed to the core ideals of feminism, its historical struggles, and its context-dependent iterations. They are also aware of the notion of homegrown feminism, that is, that feminism is organic and its usage and application can be context-specific, and that this makes it attractive to a more diverse array of activists. However, for these women, their class positioning and the manner in which feminist and class politics plays out in an organisational setting limits the type of cross-class solidarity that can be achieved. For Iza, Nadiah, and Suhaila, the politics of naming at best simplifies their commitment to and identification with feminist principles, and may provide an aura of exclusivity. But given their social location and educational background, perhaps the politics of naming is one area that they are not interested in transcending.

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