

POLITICAL AGENCY IN THE BLOGGING OF THE EVERYDAY: THE CASE OF MUSLIM WOMEN BLOGGERS

SHAFIZAN MOHAMED ¹

Department of Communication, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100, Gombak, Selangor. Email: shafizan@iium.edu.my

Accepted date: 19 November 2017

Published date: 27 December 2017

To cite this document:

Mohamed, S (2017) Political Agency In The Blogging Of The Everyday: The Case Of Muslim Women Bloggers. Journal of Islamic, Social and Development, 2(6), 152 - 165.

Abstract: *This study looks at women's religious conviction as a form of political agency that can be both resistant and submissive. The narratives of the women in this study showed that women can be political within religious submission. These women who had been conditioned by the religious and political culture to accept and adopt a secondary role to men had found through blogging the ability to be politically expressive and authoritative. Blogging enabled them to challenge the gendered dichotomy of the private and public by allowing them to share and make significant their private experiences. This study on Muslim women bloggers contributes to the inclusive understanding of subject formation in feminist theories, indicating that women's religious convictions can lead to material political transformations.*

Keywords: *Bloggers; Women; Feminism; Islam; Religion; Malaysia; Politics; Culture*

Introduction

Religious submission and political emancipation do not always correlate. The spiritual experiences of Muslim women especially have been seen as negative subjugation. This is especially relevant within feminist traditions where the distinctions between the public and private as well as the personal and the political in women's lives are considered reasons why women succumb to gendered traditions that position them as less worthy than man. However, postmodern feminist theorists have slowly begun to deconstruct the notions of the personal and the political while accepting a more fluid interpretation of the public and the private. In this sense, the private and the personal may just be significantly political.

The availability of new media has further blurred the lines between the public and the private. Women especially are sharing their everyday personal experiences on very public domains. In this sharing of the personal, many of these women are directly or indirectly participating in political discourses. This study aims to contribute to this deconstruction of the private and

personal in women's lives by focusing on the experiences of Muslim women bloggers who defy the stereotypes put upon them. This study will show that:

1. Through blogging, women found the ability to be politically expressive and authoritative.
2. Blogging enabled women to challenge the gendered dichotomy of the private and public by allowing them to share and make significant their private experiences.
3. Blogging can translate private experiences into political participation when framed in the context of laws and policies.

The six Malaysian women interviewed in this study are amongst the many Muslim women who are both domesticated and intellectually liberated within the context of Islam. These women are not just Muslims; they are educated and middle class as well. They are not representative of the clichéd portrayal of the subjugated Muslim woman who, according to Vasilaki (2011, p. 3), is often depicted as the “victim of her culture: stereotyped as covered, subservient and docile in a culture in which women are often thought to be secondary, passive and manipulated agents, the Muslim woman has been the ideal example of powerlessness and victimization”. The experiences scrutinized in this study come from a specific group of Muslim women who are in the general sense modern and not entirely subjugated. The three married women – Aini, Aida and Fariza – were all professional working mothers; while the three single women – Zue, Maryani and Suraya – were pursuing degrees in Economics, Engineering and Law, respectively.

These women were all devout Muslims. They wore the veil, prayed and tried their best to profess Islam as a way of life. As such, despite being modern in that they were educated professionals, these women still conformed to the gendered roles outlined by the state and Islamic tradition. It is in this intersection between modernity, religion and gendered roles that these women were able to provide the narratives that inform this study. Open ended questions were used to excavate their experience. Questions range from their personal background, blogging experience and political participation. Each woman was interviewed individually and each session took one to two hours. Thematic coding was done to identify the important experiences that these women shared. Literatures on feminism, women's' agency, religion and gendered traditions form the structure of this study. These theoretical ideas then needed to be understood from the women's' own unique social, political and cultural background. This is done in the next section.

Islam, Gender and Citizenship in Malaysia

According to Lister (2007), the twentieth-century mainstream theorisation of citizenship has tended to ignore how women's gradual achievement of civil, political and social rights have a different pattern from men's. Likewise, it has tended to dismiss women's earlier exclusion as a historical anomaly. The works of feminist scholars have, on the contrary, revealed how, in both theory and practice that citizenship has been quintessentially male. Looking at the Malaysian political demographics and cultural representation, it is hard to deny Lister's contention. Malaysia is a paternalistic society (Mohamad et. al 2006). Even in the age of globalisation and women's empowerment, women are still expected to fulfil their traditional roles of being the care-giver at home. Women still play secondary role to men in politics and government. While men are expected to fulfil public duties, women are still left to carry the burden of house work (Othman, 2006). It is due to this politicised distinction between the domestic and the public

roles and the biased separation of the personal and the political that Malaysian women are structurally excluded in the fulfilment of citizenship.

Malaysian feminist scholars such as Othman (2006) and Mohamad (2010) have argued that the Islamisation process in the global Muslim world in the 1970s and 1980s has further “gendered” the Malaysian public life. The rise of political Islam that came in the forms of student movements and religious associations saw greater demands for moral and religious action from the state, which was then seen as secular and not representing the true Islamic leadership and governance (Hamid, 2009). In response to these political pressures, the 1980s and 1990s saw Islamisation being co-opted into state policies. The strategy was to bring Islam within the state’s modernising project (Stivens, 2017). For example, to appear more attuned to Islamic concerns, the state initiated an Islamic bank, an Islamic university, an Islamic insurance scheme, as well as the Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding, which was charged with shaping an Islamic work ethic (Tong & Turner, 2008). Mohamad (2010) further argued that the Islamisation project could also be seen clearly in the bureaucratisation of Islam in terms of the implementation of *Shariah* laws and the expansion of Islamic public institutions.

Foley (2001) noted that because the government's modern version of Islam did not entail a rethinking of the traditional gender roles, the struggle for political power between the political and religious establishments has resulted in greater scrutiny of ‘natural women’, the bearers of morality. Stivens (2017) supported this claim by documenting how the state’s implementation of family values within the Islamisation project has confirmed patriarchal stereotypes: women were enjoined to become good mothers and wives while men were to support their female dependants. As such, a conservative discourse regarding Muslim women emerged, incorporating the belief that women and men were equal but different, meaning that each gender had its own functions and roles that the opposite gender could not fulfil.

Despite such gendered tradition, Tong and Turner (2008) and Frisk (2009) claimed that there was a degree of acceptance by Malaysian Muslim women of the Islamic differential interpretation of gender roles because it provided them with respect and value as mothers and wives; it also enabled them to hold men accountable to certain Islamic responsibilities such as providing for their wives and children. This naturalised acceptance of women’s roles and the prevalence of Islam in the everyday life have made Muslim women, such as those interviewed in this study, to not resist the gendered and discriminatory political culture. For these Muslim women bloggers especially, discriminatory policies that place women in the private sphere and emphasise their role as primarily domestic care-providers are accepted as a religious duty and are not confronted publicly or politically. Discriminatory policies are generally not seen as a major threat to citizenship as women in general are given the basic rights to vote and participate in public discourse.

Contextualising *Dakwah* in Blogging

Dakwah is the generic Arabic term for any Muslim (or non-Muslim) missionary activity. Historically, both in Malaysia and the wider Muslim world, it has come to encompass a whole range of meanings. In its contemporary use in the Muslim world, *Dakwah* has taken on a new meaning of renewed commitment to religion by the existing Muslim population, thus not referring exclusively to the conversion of non-Muslims. Several scholars have pointed to the fact that there is sometimes confusion as to what is actually meant by *Dakwah* in the Malaysian context (Osman, 2017). They are referring not so much to the ideological and demographic

aspects of the movement but as to what *Dakwah* is meant to describe. On one hand, it is used to refer to specific individuals, groups, institutions and organisations in order to spread the Islamic faith. On the other hand, *Dakwah* represents a very broad wave of raised Islamic consciousness among Malays. Thus, Foley (2001) and Frisk (2009) emphasised its importance as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon, as opposed to its significance as a network of organisations and institutions.

For Frisk (2009), the consequences of a raised Islamic awareness can manifest in many forms on an individual and collective level. It can result in a stronger personal commitment to Islam, entailing a change in practice. Instead of praying irregularly, a person starts to pray five times a day and initiates a search for spiritual guidance from God and the Quran. For some, this is a personal process while for others it involves reaching out and joining loosely organised study groups. A stronger commitment to Islam can also lead to a desire to affect other people's lives in the direction of Islam. A strong commitment to Islam can also result in participation in formal group activities. For some, the commitment leads to more overt political involvement. In some cases, the aim is to change Muslims into better Muslims and in other cases there are explicit political goals such as the establishment of an Islamic state.

The women studied here were engaged in activities that certainly corresponded to this upsurge in religiosity. These women were committed Muslims who lived everyday within the Islamic tradition. They continuously found the need to become good Muslims and did not just participate in religious activities; they also approached blogging as a form of their personal *Dakwah* effort to become better Muslims by helping other Muslims or non-Muslims with the guidance of Islam. Zue, who is single and an active student, related how blogging was her own religious practice and expression:

This world is temporary, what we leave behind when we pass on is mostly our thoughts and ideas, what we share with others. Islam teaches us that the only things that are taken with us to the hereafter are the knowledge we share, the prayers of our children and the charity we give others. So I take this as my preparation for the hereafter. This is my *Dakwah*. Who knows? Someone might read my postings and find it enlightening. That would be a reward. Even if I was writing something personal, if someone finds it relatable, I have in some way helped another human.

Zue distinctively explicated how blogging could become a form of *Dakwah*. While she admitted that her blog was mostly her own journal where she recorded her own thoughts and views, she found it necessary to make sure that the thoughts and views that she shared were significant and could benefit others. She claimed that Islam emphasises the importance of knowledge sharing, and blogging was one of the ways where she could fulfil this religious demand. Hence, blogging was her *Dakwah*, her contribution to others and her service to God. It is evident that in their desire for *Dakwah*, these women understood blogging to be more than an act of writing and sharing. The way they took responsibility for their blogging and attempted to create a space that was theirs and yet beneficial to others, indicates that these women have found a way of challenging and transforming the gendered space in which they were often confined to stay in the private sphere.

Feminist Agency and The Diffusion of The Political

These women were practicing feminist agency that could be defined loosely as a woman's capability to act independently and choose to live according to her desires, despite the numerous suppressing influences such as culture, religion and men. According to McNay (2013), the theoretical foundation of feminist agency has always been one that is politically-inclined. Agency in feminism has always been related to subversive action against patriarchy and misogyny. There have been criticisms of feminist agency as being too confined to the idea of women's resistive action against patriarchy and gender subordination, as this universalistic interpretation of agency mostly ends with a dichotomised notion of resistance and subjection (McNay 2013). Thus, when applying feminist theory to the evidence in this study, I found the conceptualisation of women's agency in terms of resistance to submission to be much too limited to reveal the experiences of these Muslim women bloggers. In this respect, these women occupy a particularly awkward space in feminist scholarship as they pursued practices and ideals that were embedded within traditions that historically have accorded women a subordinate status (Rinaldo, 2010).

In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood (2005) wrote against these naturalised, universalistic theories and assumptions. Through her ethnographic work with the women's mosque movement in urban Egypt, Mahmood questioned well-established assumptions in feminist theory and secular-liberal thought concerning the ideal of human and political agency. She challenged the binary opposition between resistance and subordination as a characteristic of secular liberal thought and poststructuralist feminism. Mahmood analysed the conceptions of self, moral agency and politics that underlie the practices of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, a movement in which women provide lessons to one another on Islamic doctrine in order to cultivate an ideal virtuous self. Mahmood considered the dilemma that women's active support of socio-religious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses for feminist analysts. She refused to use the term "false consciousness" to resolve the dilemma of women's subordination to feminine virtues, such as shyness and modesty.

Moreover, Mahmood (2005) did not try to portray women's resistance to the dominant male order and their subversion of the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices, which is the focus of the work of a number of other feminist scholars. Rather, she explored how the focus on agency and the assumptions underlying this focus could constitute a barrier to the exploration of movements such as the one she addressed. Mahmood argued that human agency is not limited to acts that challenge social norms. By claiming that agential capacity is "entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (p. 15), Mahmood defied the normative liberal assumptions about human nature, including the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom and autonomy, and that human agency consists of acts that challenge social norms.

Mahmood (2005) argued persuasively that there are different forms of agency that can only be understood by confronting the discursive milieu in which only one version of agency – the liberal democratic one – is conceived as universal. Mahmood (2005) then proposed the possibility of thinking about women's political agency in terms of adherence to discriminatory gender practices and ideas emanating from a religious discursive tradition that detaches political agency from its secular lineage. She also suggested the freeing of feminist agency from the politics of grand narratives of emancipation and argued for a subsequent re-orientation to forms of micro-politics where religious expression holds a prominent place. Mahmood argued that

when the unified feminist subject comes into question, and the subscription to the idea of a universal patriarchy and the necessity to overthrow the unequal relations of power it sustains and enables, no longer enjoy unanimity, then political action as well as political subjectivity will be re-opened to definition.

Parallel to Mahmood's (2005) proposal for a re-defined idea of political action and political subjectivity in understanding feminist religious expression, this study also found that the Muslim women blogger's consistent attachment to the notion of *Dakwah* in their blogging experience indicates a form of feminist agency that takes religious subjectivity not as negative discrimination or subjugation but rather as a creative motivation and justification for agential actions. Agency in this sense comes from accommodating individual actions and goals within a religious framework where service for the religion becomes the ultimate end. It also suggests that, for these women, agency is not particularly resistant to relations of domination, but more a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination have enabled and created.

It is in these religious agential acts that arose from the blogging of the everyday that these women were becoming participative and even political through what McClure (1992) called the "diffusion of the political". McClure proposed that political action can arise from all aspects of life and can range or expand from private realms such as the family to the realms of state and governance. McClure (1992) suggested that when the lines that separate the public from the private and the personal from the political diminish, the terrain of political contestation opens up to acknowledge politics in the everyday enactment and reiteration of social practices and cultural representation. This allows the nature of political action to expand and include not only demands for basic citizen rights and quality of life, but also to define what is considered culturally intelligible; that is, the transformation of legitimised cultural codes and social discourses becomes a form of political action.

McClure's (1992) theorisation is an important framework in feminist studies, especially when explaining women's participation in public and political issues. Her ability to delineate how the personal and the private can become important sites for political action strongly resist the private/public dichotomy that has engulfed the celebration of women's' participation in political activism. By diffusing the concept of the political to be more fluid and more inclusive of actions that are not limited to institutional politics, researchers have become more receptive to the idea of activism that and operates in lived personal, social and even cultural domains. Thus, McClure's theorisation of "the political" explains the women bloggers' claims of *Dakwah* through a wider lens where the dynamic of power relations become apparent.

Blogging for *Dakwah* and the Politics of The Personal

It is in the bloggers' insistence that their blogging intentions were mostly divine that they were really challenging the gendered dichotomies of private/public, personal/political and resistance/submission. Their experiences showed that they were able to negotiate around and even challenge the socio-political and cultural mechanisms that limited their ability and desire to participate in public and political issues. Although these women viewed blogging as a religious responsibility, by sharing and creating discourses around their everyday experiences, these women were also politicising what would normally be considered private and domestic concerns. As such, in pursuing religious contentment, these women were subsequently participating in public actions. In their blogging for *Dakwah*, these women were making the

personal, political. They did this by identifying religious connotations in their ability to pursue self-direction, support issue advocacy, and build community discourse.

Blogging and the Pursuit of Self-Direction

In their blogging and sharing of personal experiences, these women were able to exert agency in the form of self-direction. According to Abrams (1999), when the notions of the political are diffused, it is possible to acknowledge that women's ability to formulate their own life goals and plans that break away from the normalised expectations imposed on them is in itself a powerful form of political agency. Abrams argued that such agential acts become more significant when, in the realisation of personal goals, women recognise the social influences that shape those goals. Abrams (1999, p.830) claimed that "awareness of the ways in which social formation may shape one's goals, or the ways in which one pursues them, may provide room in which to affirm, reject, or modify some of these means and ends".

This form of agency was found in the experience of Aini, a 31-year old divorcee. Through blogging, Aini discovered her ability to become a social activist and to resist cultural and legal traditions that she felt often sacrificed women's rights. Aini was someone who not only succumbed to the gendered tradition of politics and participation, she internalised it and felt that as a woman, she was inferior when it came to participating in politics and issues. Aini revealed:

As a female blogger, I think we (female bloggers) tend to express our emotions... as for me personally I am not that confident to write about serious politics because I don't think I am capable enough to answer or respond to political comments. I usually just express. When I write I don't really provide serious analysis, I just write based on my views and experience. Mentally I think we are different from male bloggers. I somehow feel more inferior.

Aini understood politics to be gendered. Politics to her involved issues that had nothing to do with emotions – something she identified as a female attribute. She claimed to only be capable of expressing her ideas and being unable to provide serious analysis like male bloggers. Aini saw politics as something beyond her reach. Her gendered ideas of blogging and politics may be the result of the systematic structural tradition that deliberately pushes women away from actualising their potential as citizens. The way she portrayed herself in this statement indicates a woman who was subjugated by patriarchy and lacked political agency. However, it took a personal tragedy to make Aini aware of her potential. While she had been blogging since her university days, she only discovered a personal purpose in blogging after experiencing divorce:

I actually stopped blogging while I was going through the divorce. Support came mostly from family and close friends. To me blogging became more important after I got my divorce. It became an avenue for me to express myself, not just about my personal emotional experience but also about sharing my experience legally dealing with divorce procedures. I have people asking me for advice as they are also experiencing the same thing, so I want to share all the details.

Aini did not blog as a way of dealing with her personal pain. She claimed that she actually had to stop blogging to deal with her divorce. What she found through blogging was the ability to make her experience useful for others. In sharing her experience, she discovered an audience that was interested in her experience and was asking for her advice. In this situation, where her experience became a point of reference, Aini discovered her ability to contribute to others.

Through the responses she received, she discovered a sense of power and authority that countered the gendered idea she held; that is, that personal emotions and self-expressions were apolitical. Giving advice and educating others about court procedures allowed Aini to defy her own understanding of the so-called ‘emotional woman’ and the masculine politics. Despite her initial awareness of the social formation that limited feminine emotions to the private, Aini was able to challenge the gendered constraints placed on private experiences and pursue them publicly:

I never had a diary in my life but once I started blogging, I feel like I want to capture every moment. Especially now that I have kids, I want to keep their memories. It’s not really about showing it to others, it’s more of a personal keepsake. At the same time, I feel like I have a purpose... talking about court procedures and sharing them. I also have to reply and answer all the emails and questions that I get from others.

While her blog was a personal keepsake where she preserved her memories, it was also her connection to the public where she could share and advice about divorce procedures. In this experience of claiming that her blog was a form of diary, something that was private and her way of gaining a purpose through blogging about her divorce experience, Aini was also resisting the dichotomised space between her private personal life and her public persona. Blogging allowed her to challenge the gendered idea that personal and emotional experiences are in no way connected to public participation. Aini is sharing her personal stories while explaining and implicating them in terms of politics and institutions. In this instance, blogging creates what Cottle (2011) considers as a space for social inclusivity, group recognition and democratic participation that facilitates new modes of political engagement and participation. As someone who claimed to feel inferior when it came to writing about serious issues, Aini was doing more than just analysing and discussing, she was an expert to readers who went to her for advice. She found self-direction in helping others:

I want other women like me to know their rights and fight for them. The average public will not know much about all the procedures. As someone who has gone through them, I am compelled to share and to some extent educate others, especially the women. I used to write for myself but after sharing my experience people started to tell me their stories and I end up giving counselling. I feel responsible to help others. It’s as if god has planned this for me.

In wanting to educate women about their rights and motivating them to fight for those rights, Aini had become an active citizen. She had become aware of the social formation that had limited her own agential capacity. Although she was divorced and felt helpless initially, she found a way through blogging to resist her own gendered understanding of politics, participation and womanhood. Aini found agency in taking charge of her experience and making it more than just a personal tragedy. She set a new self-direction for herself. Aini was not just a divorcee; she had become a social activist. She took her role in counselling other women as her responsibility and saw her experience as something planned by God. By insisting it was God’s plan for her, Aini, in her own terms, resisted the rigid interpretation applied to the Muslim woman. The pious Muslim woman is not one who submits to her fate, she is someone who is able to find greater meaning and purpose through her experience. In discovering her new self-direction, Aini became involved in the material transformation of politics and citizenship whereby she was an active citizen who not only blogged about laws and institutions, but was shaping how other women related to and negotiated the legal system, the state’s policies and institutional traditions.

Blogging for Issue Advocacy

Blogging about the personal enabled these women to adopt issue advocacy. The desire to share and help others in the name of *Dakwah* led them to bring forward and fight for issues that were personal to them. I identify how blogging can become a form of advocacy through focusing on the experience of Suraya, a 23 year old law student. Suraya was passionate about law – *Shariah* law especially. *Shariah* is the moral code and religious law of Islam. *Shariah* deals with many topics addressed by secular law, including crime, politics and economics, as well as personal matters such as sexual intercourse, hygiene, diet, prayer and fasting (Mohamad, 2010).

Though interpretations of *Shariah* vary between cultures, in its strictest definition it is considered the infallible law of God. *Shariah* has often been criticised by secular feminists as central to female subjugation in Islam (Othman, 2006). Some of the controversial *Shariah* laws that relate to women include the veil and limited rights in marriage. For Suraya, *Shariah* was the law of Islam and, as a Law student; she considered it her responsibility to correct any misunderstanding about the law:

I've always been very interested in *Shariah*, its implementation especially, so if there is something that triggers me I will write it in my blog. I am interested to pursue *Shariah* law in the future [professionally]. At the same time, I find it hard to understand why groups like the *Sisters in Islam* are still unclear of the *Shariah* concept. It is not that I am such an expert but I feel that I need to share whatever I know. I feel responsible to correct any misunderstandings on *Shariah*.

Suraya's attempt to defend and educate about the *Shariah* indicates a form of issue advocacy. Despite the controversies surrounding the law, Suraya was adamant about the need for its implementation. In her efforts to defend her stance, she educated others by blogging about the provisions of the law. She further supported the law by trying to respond to the controversies surrounding it. Suraya's strong advocacy for the law is interesting because it represents the contention by Mahmood (2005) that women can find agency in submitting to religious traditions. Suraya claimed to not understand why "groups like *Sisters in Islam* are still unclear of the *Shariah* concept". In this statement, Suraya specifically mentioned the *Sisters in Islam* organisation of Muslim women in Malaysia, which seeks to articulate women's rights in Islam by emphasising the need to interpret the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* in their proper historical and cultural contexts. With regard to the *Shariah* especially, *Sisters in Islam* has been at the forefront criticising not the law specifically, but mostly the implementation of the legislation, which it considers to be haphazard. For example, there is no standardised implementation of the *Shariah* across the 14 states in Malaysia, meaning that each state has the ability to define and impose its own understanding of the *Shariah*. This unsystematic approach, according to *Sisters in Islam*, allows unaccountable discrimination against women especially in instances where the majority of the *Shariah* judges are male (Osman & Hirst, 2013).

Sisters in Islam engages in a re-reading of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* with the aim of developing a "feminist fiqh" to replace the codified "patriarchal" family law of the Malaysian state, which is derived from Islamic law (Osman & Hirst, 2013). Through a range of activities in research and advocacy, publications and education initiatives both locally and internationally, *Sisters in Islam* has raised awareness on the contested nature of Islam in Malaysia. They have also challenged the authority of the *Ulama* (religious scholars) and other religious groups on Islamic issues (Othman, 2006). Because of its sound reputation and support from many educated elites, *Sisters in Islam* has been able to speak in public on alternative views on Islam and *Shariah*. As

claimed by one of the pioneers of the organisation, Othman (2006, p. 349), Sisters in Islam are able to “challenge the obscurantist view which discriminates against women and which is detrimental to the best interest of a modernizing, industrializing multi-racial and multi-religious society”. In recent times, Sisters in Islam have persistently taken a stance on public positions on women’s and human rights issues that expand to areas of democracy and fundamental rights.

Despite their commendable profile in the global feminist and human rights circles, the Sisters in Islam faces heavy criticism from Muslim groups for its bold re-interpretation of the *Quran* and *Hadith*, an act considered deviant by Muslims who take the *Quran* as the unquestioned word of God. The reputation of Sisters in Islam among pious and middle-class Muslim women is mixed with many disagreeing with the group’s version of feminism. The Sisters in Islam are often associated with urban and Westernised professional Muslims. Their brand of feminism is sometimes considered too liberal and un-Islamic. In this study, Suraya was an example of a Muslim woman who finds the Sisters in Islam problematic.

Suraya’s position highlights the dilemma posed to feminist analysis by women’s active support of socio-religious traditions that sustain principles of female subordination. By accepting that agential capacity “entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15), Suraya can be considered an advocate even if she supported a tradition that was gendered and discriminatory according to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature. To an extent, Suraya was even challenging the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom and autonomy, and that human agency consists of acts that challenge social norms.

In Suraya’s acceptance of and advocacy for gendered tradition and strict religious law is an effective example of the argument by Mahmood (2005) - agency should not be seen as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable. For Suraya, her blogging about the *Shariah* was her service to Islam and to her fellow Muslims. In her apparent submission to God’s law, she politicised her personal religious views by advocating them through serious analysis, educating her readers and challenging the socio-political norms that, to Suraya, appeared to be against the *Shariah*. Her strong commitments indicate a form of agency that Muslim women adopt in their attempt to justify their beliefs and resist external attempts to scrutinise and disregard what they consider valid and significant. This conceptualisation of agency focused more on women’s capacity to act based on free will, whether in the form of subordination or resistance, opens a way to explain why women like Suraya are committed to the strict Islamic tradition that may appear rigid and oppressive.

Blogging and the Building of Community Discourse

Through blogging about the everyday, these women were also able to form community discourses around their personal experiences. They did this by engaging with other women, sharing experiences and providing support around issues that were relevant to their own lives. In these instances, these women were able to form a collective and assert authority over issues that would have been considered domestic and private. When these women realised that blogging was not entirely a private activity and that it could link them to others who might be interested in what they had to say, they felt empowered to make the most of their experiences and participate in community discourses. By receiving responses and engaging in discussions, these women were able to accord value to their personal, everyday experiences, while at the

same time feeling responsible for doing the same for others. This resonates with the proposal of Abrams (1999) that women's agency and resistance can be encouraged by the sheer force of their (the women's) insight, the sense of power conferred by other group-based attributes, the support of other women, or the receptiveness or the resistance of their first 'outside' audiences, to act on this insight to alter the arrangements in which they find themselves (p.837)

This ability to turn private experiences into community discourse can be located in the experience of Fariza who managed to form solidarity with a community of mothers who shared her experience. Fariza, an engineer and a mother of four, could be seen as having succumbed to the double burden of having to work and care for her family. However, Fariza refused to see herself as subjugated. As a Muslim woman, she held her role as a wife and mother in high regard. While she put her interest in politics and social issues aside to give priority to her children, blogging enabled her to be a devoted mother and active citizen as well:

Blogging fits well with my everyday demands. I mean I can still be with the children and still be sharing and communicating with friends. It also gives me a form of motivation to write because I know that there are people reading it.

By having the chance to still blog and share with others without having to sacrifice family time, Fariza found a way of making her domestic experience beneficial to her readers. She used blogging to alter the social arrangement that might have left her alone in performing her domestic duties. Blogging about her domestic experience enabled her to negotiate between accepting domestic duty and performing public duty. To her, blogging was not simply about writing for expression or self-satisfaction; she explained that:

My main motivation to blog is to share the good things, whatever they may be. Just like when my son was admitted to the hospital for swine flu. I shared my experience so that I can help others who did not have the experience or information. I even received a thank you sms (short message service) from one of my readers. She said that when her child had the same symptoms as my son, she went for a check-up and that saved her son because initially she didn't think that her son was that sick.

Blogging about everyday experiences allowed Fariza to creatively portray that being in the domestic sphere did not necessarily mean being passive. Instead she showed that she could also contribute to the wider society by becoming a dutiful mother who cared for her sick child and also a mother who was very much informed about the available medical care options. In this sense, she was not only a citizen who felt responsible for helping others; she had become a source of practical knowledge about health care and child care. The issues she discussed related to her domestic role and could easily be dismissed as "mommy talk" in everyday conversations. But for Fariza, she was not engaging in a conversation, rather she was creating a community where her readers could reflect on their own experiences and relate them to specific issues. Blogging was also a space where she had become the authority who deliberately turned a particular experience or issue into an active public discourse. According to her, "I am not the kind who writes on demand; if I find the topic interesting – like there was one time when I opened a discussion on whether housewives should employ maids – I would discuss and moderate the discussions with my readers"

In this conscious act of wanting to understand, deliberate and create discourses about issues and policies, Fariza exuded agency through her acceptance of the gendered role of a working mother. There was nothing subversive in her agential act; she was not sharing her experience to criticise the government or to undermine the role of the father, husband or any man in

particular. She chose to write, share and even create discussions on these issues because she saw it as her way of doing good in the name of religion:

I see it [blogging and sharing about issues] as a form of *Dakwah*. *Dakwah* is part of my purpose in life. I need to contribute and not just blog for the fun of it. I want to be good in everything that makes me a better Muslim, may it be in being a mother, a wife or a blogger.

Fariza found contentment in knowing that she was living according to the traditions of Islam. She strove to be a good mother and, at the same time, find a way to perform her duty for *Dakwah* in the sharing of her experiences. Fariza's experience resonates with the contention by Mahmood (2005) that social norms (and religious norms) do not necessarily impose constraints on the individual. Instead, they become the important ground on which a subject/woman can find realisation and agency. In Fariza's ability to create community discourses based on her domestic experience, she not only added value to her own experience, she also helped her readers to do the same. Fariza managed, through blogging about her parenting and motherhood experience, to mobilise discourses that had a direct connection to institutions and policies. The way she was able to create and moderate discussions about health care and domestic help transformed the ways women viewed and experienced domestic life. Personal experiences were no longer isolated in private but were being brought into the public sphere and discussed in terms of policies and collective action. In this mesh of the private and public, personal and political, these women were able to create a political space that was unique to their own context, participating within their own understanding while staying true to the Islamic framework.

Resistance and Transformation in The Blogging of The Personal

These women blogged and became involved in issues and politics within an Islamic framework where gendered traditions are evident. The way they negotiated the gendered ideals of Islam and the ability to act on their own free will offered an interesting insight into how agency can persist even within religious subjectivity. In the name of duty to God or *Dakwah*, these women had become agents who creatively accepted and resisted subjections and traditions that they felt were important in their realisation to be a better Muslim. In traditions that they felt were necessary and significant in their becoming a good Muslim, these women creatively justified their acceptance and accommodation through critical analysis, lengthy discussions and active participation. They did not passively accept traditions such as domestication without going through some intellectual and emotional deliberation. Similarly, when agency was used to resist state or cultural norms and traditions, it was often done on the basis of submission to God. Thus, agency as experienced by these women could be receptive or resistant depending on whether they perceived it compatible with the Islamic framework.

The desire to submit to God's will is an important aspect of women's religious commitment that would be overlooked in an analysis that has the explicit purpose of understanding Islam through secular feminism. While accepting and justifying certain gendered traditions can be considered religious agency, these women also engaged in acts of resistance that concurred with the general understanding of feminist agency. However, the kind of resistance that these women engage in was different. The target of their resistance was not the gendered practices of patriarchy but was instead the systems and cultures that they felt were depriving them the rights and authority they deserve as Muslim women.

For these women, the acceptance and resistance they asserted in their act of religious submission did not stop with their own feelings of liberation and satisfaction, but was materialised in their direct participation in issues and politics. As such, while these women may have been submissive to God, they were also active citizens who were engaged (through blogging) in evaluating and disrupting laws, traditions, cultures and policies that affected their lives and the lives of other women as well. There was a collective aspect to their agency. Thus, I would argue that in these acts of inhabiting and upholding religious norms, there was also an evident material transformation in terms of the diffusion of the political that is a consistent feature in feminist struggles.

Conclusion

This study opposed the common image of Muslim women as oppressed victims and instead presented them as active agents. By blogging and sharing their life experiences in the name of *Dakwah* and the desire for God's blessings, the women bloggers investigated in this study not only made public their private experiences, they politicised them by creating discourses and mobilising public interest and collective actions. By finding self-direction and creating community discourses, these women found it possible to participate in and challenge the exclusive and gendered character of Malaysian politics. In doing so, they diffused the notion of the political by making all aspects of everyday life potentially open for political action. What is unique about these women's acts of agency is that it was grounded more in religious submission rather than political emancipation. Thus, their agential acts went beyond conventional understanding of agency as resistance to submission. Their agency came from an innate desire to become better Muslims and in their attempt to do this they found it important to also contribute to material transformations. It is in the negotiation of religious goals and structural transformation that these women disrupt the gendered notion of politics and participation.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, K. (1998). From autonomy to agency: Feminist perspectives on self-direction. *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.*, 40, 805.
- Cottle, S. (2011). Media and the Arab uprisings of 2011: Research notes. *Journalism*, 12(5), 647- 659.
- Foley, Rebecca & Monash University. School of Political and Social Inquiry & Monash University. Thesis (2001). *The challenge of contemporary Muslim women activists in Malaysia*
- Frisk, S. (2009). *Submitting to God: women and Islam in urban Malaysia*. University of Washington Press: Seattle
- Hamid, A.F.A. (2009). Transnational Islam in Malaysia. *Report by Peter Mandaville, et. Al. Transnational Islam in South and Southeast Asia: Movements, Networks, and Conflict Dynamicspp*, 141-166.
- Lister, R. (2007). Inclusive citizenship: Realizing the potential. *Citizenship studies*, 11(1), 49-61.

- Mahmood, Saba (2005), *Politics of Piety, The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford.^[1]_{SEP}
- McClure, K (1992) *On the Subject of Rights: Pluralism, Plurality and Political Identity*, in Mouffe, C (ed) *Dimensions Of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*. Verso
- McNay, L. (2013). *Gender and agency: Reconfiguring the subject in feminist and social theory*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mohamad, M, Ng, C and Beng, HT (2006) *Feminism and Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*. London: Routledge Malaysian Studies Series.
- Mohamad, M. (2010) The Ascendance of Bureaucratic Islam and the Secularization of the Sharia in Malaysia *Pacific Affairs*; 83 (3) 505-527
- Osman, M. N. M. (2017). The Islamic conservative turn in Malaysia: impact and future trajectories. *Contemporary Islam*, 11(1), 1-20.
- Osman, R., & Hirst, C. (2013). Sisters in Islam. In *Muslim Secular Democracy* (pp. 191-210). Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Rinaldo, R. (2010). Women and Piety Movements. *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, 584-605.
- Stivens, M. (2017). Making Spaces in Malaysia. *Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, 266.
- Tong, J. K.C. and Turner, B.S. (2008) Women, piety and practice: A study of women and religious practice in Malaya, *Contemporary Islam* 2: 41–59