WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN MALAYSIA

Voices and Insights

Julian C. H. Lee

Women's Activism in Malaysia

"*Women's Activism in Malaysia* explores the experiences of selected women's rights activists in their own words. The book is informed both by theoretical insights, including the notion of 'indigenous feminism', as well as Lee's one and a half decades of friendship and intermittent engagement with activists in the Klang Valley. Speaking as a male feminist anthropologist, he emphasises how the pursuit of women's emancipation is intricately interwoven with the wider struggle against social oppression".

—Helen Ting, *Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia*

"Women's rights activists in Malaysia have been crossing and breaking down racial, religious, and national boundaries for several decades. Julian C. H. Lee's excellent and concise account of their strategies is a welcome introduction to a critical site of activism in Malaysia. It will interest all those concerned with the broader struggle for democracy in electoral authoritarian regimes".

—Saskia Schäfer, *Freie Universität, Berlin*

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palgrave
macmillan

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Cover illustration: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

Printed on acid-free paper

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is conventional in Acknowledgements for an author to express in a sentence thanks to the anonymous scholars to whom the publisher sent the draft manuscript for review. However, I wish here to do a little more than that and express my gratitude to the reviewers of this book for their encouragement and also their clear, thoughtful and genuinely helpful suggestions, all of which I considered carefully and almost all of which I acted upon. It is a great pity that convention means I cannot name these reviewers and give them the acknowledgement they deserve. However, against academic convention, I have occasionally made reference to and quoted their remarks in the text to acknowledge their impact upon it.

Finally I would like to thank Sarah J. Thwaites, my partner, for all her support and encouragement over the years in which this book has come into being. I must also acknowledge the cheerfulness and humour of my two children, Elspeth and Hamish, who have made the environment in which I have worked so delightful.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract Lee presents the reader with a background to the author's engagement with and experience in human rights and women's rights activism in Malaysia. In addition to describing the contents of the book, the Introduction also introduces the reader to the political climate in which activism occurs in Malaysia, and notes the global relevance of women's rights activism in Malaysia.

Keywords Malaysia · Activism · Civil society · Authoritarianism

Although I have been a Malaysian citizen from birth, I spent my teenage years and much of my twenties in Melbourne, Australia. In 2002, I resolved to reconnect with the country of my citizenship and to combine that resolve with interests I had been developing about democracy and human rights. In 2003, I commenced a Ph.D. project on human rights activism in Malaysia, and planned to go to Kuala Lumpur for a year's worth of participant-observation. It was my immense good fortune that a fellow Ph.D. candidate at the time introduced me to Zaitun 'Toni' Kasim, who happened to be visiting Melbourne in 2003. Although I did not know it then, Toni was a major character in Malaysia's tight-knit community of civil society activists. Her amazing life was the subject of the book *Many Shades of Good* (Kua 2009). But it was as a result of her efforts and introductions that I made my entry into a circle of Malaysia's

diverse human rights activists with whom, in one way or another, I continued to conduct research for more than ten years.

For the Ph.D. I was pursuing in 2003, I had no hypothesis that I was testing. I was, instead, interested in seeing how activists in Malaysia operated in an authoritarian political environment. I was interested in their motivations and strategies for pursuing their diverse causes which, overall, could be said to be in direct and indirect aid of defending or affirming an understanding of the public sphere in which Malaysians could participate equally, irrespective of their political or ethnic orientations and affiliations. Exemplifying this is a recollection that remains strong in my mind from my first fieldwork. While chatting with Toni in her flat in a living room replete with diverse trinkets and mementoes, which mostly came from various activist causes from around the world, she told me about a book launch to which she had recently been. My recollection is that it was a book by Muslim women who were discussing their relationship with their *tudungs* (headscarves). The discussion at the book launch had rankled Toni. This was not because she was against the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women—in fact I had witnessed her vigorously defended women's right to do so. It was because, so she reported, the tone of the discussion implied or asserted that all Muslim women in Malaysia ought to embrace the *tudung*. She took exception to this. She told me how she had approached some of the women involved in the book launch to explain her feelings. The words she said to them that she recalled from that conversation, and which I continue to recall vividly, were: 'In my version of Malaysia there is room for you, but in your version of Malaysia, there is no room for me'.

The sentiment captured in this quote seems to me to speak more generally to the vision of Malaysia and its public sphere being pursued by many of the activists whose work I have followed, with different foci at different times in different projects, between 2003 and 2017. It is especially true of the women's rights activists I came to know. I have always been struck by, and in admiration of, the energy, the cohesiveness, the commitment and the sophistication of the analysis of the feminist activists I came to know, initially through Toni.

A common though not defining feature of these activists is their connection with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG). JAG, as it is referred to, is a coalition of twelve women's rights organisations and its history and achievements formed a case study in a report I was

a part of on successful women's coalitions in the Pacific (Spark and Lee 2018). JAG's inclusion in this report was intended to present a model and case study of a successful women's rights coalition. While working on this report, which was aimed at both academics and potential funders of women's rights and civil society organisations, I realised the potential academic and practical value of insights from those involved in promoting women's rights in Malaysia and it was this realisation that prompted me to write this book.

The insights in that report were not wholly based on the interview material gathered for it. They were also informed by my long-term and ethnographic engagement with activism in Malaysia, and Spark's similar engagement in PNG. The importance of such engagement in understanding the pursuit of gender justice has been highlighted by Aihwa Ong in her 2011 article 'Translating Gender Justice in Southeast Asia'. With reference to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Ong writes that 'We urgently need detailed explorations of how concepts first proposed in Beijing are translated and modified on the ground'. To that end, she continues,

> It is mandatory to have ethnographic research that is familiar with and sensitive to the particular assemblage of culture, religion, language, and politics through which the actual translation, recasting, and selective conversion of universal civil rights into local ethical idioms takes place. (Ong 2011, 44; cf. Vargas 2002, 209–210)

Although what follows in this book does not make reference to goals set out at the Beijing Conference, and although it does not seek to show explicitly how those goals are 'translated' into local contexts and idioms, what does follow is a grounded and ethnographically informed exploration of how women have perceived and pursued gender justice in Malaysia. While I agree with Ong with respect to the research agenda she calls for, for various reasons I have not couched my discussions in the terms laid out by her. For one thing, the notion of 'translating' implies to me a certain primacy of the Beijing Conference as a source of gender justice goals and concepts, which are then subsequently pursued. This implication could be seen as not giving due credit to the ways in which perceptions and efforts towards gender justice arise locally, contextually, responsively and primarily within the lifeworlds of the Malaysian women who are the focus of this book.

Therefore, in Chapter 2, which is co-authored with the emerging feminist writer Nikkola Mikocki-Bleeker, we draw on interviews with Malaysian feminists to uncover their personal encounters with and experiences of feminism, and how they regard criticisms by opponents of feminism who say it is culturally and religiously inauthentic and an inappropriate import into Malaysia. This chapter also draws on Vivian Wee and Farida Shaheed's concept of 'indigenous feminism' to respond to and to gainsay the suggestion that feminism is inherently Western. This concept posits that feminism emerges during 'women's endeavours of asserting their rights in their own socio-cultural contexts' and that 'feminism itself is indigenous to the dialectic of women's resistance and patriarchal domination' (Wee and Shaheed 2016). To explore this, this chapter examines how women's biographical experiences led them to form 'feminist' views before the term 'feminism' was known to them; it describes their subjective experience of feminism and what it means for some Malaysian women; it demonstrates how a concept such as 'feminism' does and doesn't translate into the Malaysian context; and what discursive manoeuvres some of these women use to counter suggestions that feminism is foreign.

Chapter 3 then moves from the personal and biographical to the more overtly political by exploring my first-hand experiences with the campaign formulated and run by the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) during the 2008 General Elections. WCI is a collectivity that has sought to improve the number of independent women in Malaysia's parliament, where women remain under-represented. Toni was a prime mover in WCI and it was initially through her that I was invited to join WCI's campaign to place an independent female candidate into Malaysia's parliament. I present my reflections of that campaign here because, as well as being an especially interesting campaign, it was formative for me in developing insights into both activism in general and women's rights activism in Malaysia. These are explored in the three sections that dwell on gender and the public sphere, on the impact of fear on participation in the public sphere, and the overemphasised importance of 'success' in discussions of civil society ventures.

From out of the background of the previous two chapters, Chapter 4 brings into view a vibrant, inspiring and aforementioned coalition, JAG. Although the women interviewed in Chapter 2 were not all involved in JAG organisations, and although WCI is not a JAG initiative, the milieu in which these women and WCI operate is influenced

considerably by JAG, which continues to play a leading role in the women's movement and in articulating women's issues in the Malaysian social and political domain. It has worked over several decades to advance the place of women in Malaysia and has undertaken a diverse array of campaigns to challenge sexism and misogyny, as well as homophobia and transphobia. Owing to the important place of JAG in Malaysia's civil society scene, and its central place in Malaysia's story of women's right advocacy, I draw on a set of interviews I conducted with Ceridwen Spark with members of this coalition. Chapter 4 presents to the reader the story of JAG's history, its successes and its challenges. However, whereas in Chapter 3 my own experiences were very much in the foreground as a means of exploring WCI, in Chapter 4 the voices of the women who were interviewed are entirely foregrounded, while I recede almost entirely into the background. The chapter does not seek to theorise this coalition, but instead presents the women's words directly, and interleaved in such a way that, despite the fact that they were interviewed individually, it is as if these women were gathered together in a room and were telling the story of JAG conversationally and collaboratively. Although I as an author attempt to largely disappear from view in this chapter, I am of course aware that the voices of the women are not presented raw and unmediated. Considerable efforts have been made to crop quotes and weave them together to create the narrative you will encounter, and does so in a way that conveys the cohesion, vibrancy and camaraderie in JAG in a manner that could not have been achieved with a more conventional form of presentation.

As will be seen, this camaraderie and *esprit de corps* have been forged in the difficult social and political climate that prevails in Malaysia for civil society activists. For readers unfamiliar with Malaysia, it should be noted that Malaysia has long been described as authoritarian or a semi-democratic (e.g. Munro-Kua 1996; Case 1999, 2001, 2010) or as an instance of 'competitive authoritarianism'. Levitsky and Way describe competitive authoritarian regimes as ones that are authoritarian, but have some democratic features. With respect to elections, for example, although they 'may be characterized by large-scale abuses of state power, biased media coverage, (often violent) harassment of opposition candidates and activists, and an overall lack of transparency, elections are regularly held, competitive (in that major opposition parties and candidates usually participate), and generally free of massive fraud' (2002, 52). Although electoral fraud is a concern in Malaysia (Azeem 2013), this description

is true enough of Malaysia, where an array of draconian laws is regularly made use of to smite opponents of the world's longest continuously serving elected government, a coalition of predominantly ethnically orientated parties called the Barisan Nasional (the National Front). For the most part, the draconian laws are founded in the birth of Malaya, which gained its independence in 1957 from Britain, which bequeathed a raft of legislation aimed at enabling, among other things, the suppression of an armed communist insurgency at the time (e.g. Cheah 2009). Since independence, these laws have been used regularly against the Barisan Nasional's opponents. One such notable occasion was Operasi Lalang (Operation Weed) in 1987, during which over a hundred activists, opposition party politicians and others were detained under the infamous Internal Security Act, which allowed detention without trial for renewable periods of two years (Lee 2008). This occasion, and others like it including the more recent harassment of activists and artists (Fletcher 2016), have served to warn Malaysia's citizenry of the price that might be paid for publically expressing dissent.

Malaysia is also a Muslim-majority country in which public and official piety has an increasingly important place (e.g. Thirkell-White 2006). Although Malaysian politics has always revolved around the identity politics of the key ethnic communities in Malaysia—the Malay, Chinese and Indian—Frederik Holst has described how in recent decades the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has come under sustained and effective attack from Parti Islam SeMalaysia (the Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS), which deploys Islamically framed critiques of UMNO's conduct (2016, 29–30; Liow 2004). UMNO has responded by shoring up its own Islamic credentials with an array of policies and projects, especially under the prime ministership of Mahathir Mohamad (see Wain 2009, 217–242). What this means is that, together with more 'secular authoritarianism' (if I may refer to it as such), the women's rights activists in this book must also contend with a public sphere in which religion is highly politicised.

At this point I should acknowledge that Malaysia's civil society is diverse, and has participating individuals and organisations that have an array of differing motivations, viewpoints and values. The work of these actors is sometimes guided by religion, sometimes by 'human rights', sometimes by Malaysia's Constitution, or some other framework. Although it might be argued that one could broadly separate conservatively religiously orientated civil society in Malaysia from more secular

human rights-orientated civil society, even this bifurcation is regularly transgressed in diverse coalitions and ventures, including, for example, the large and influential electoral reform movement, Bersih [Clean]. At other times, issues of class, ethnicity, language and locality can constitute barriers, whether explicit or implicit, to the building of cooperative endeavours and the formulation of shared visions and objectives.

And yet at other times they can be acknowledged with a view to being addressed or (as is noted in Chapter 4 with respect the JAG) they be drawn upon to some advantage. In any case, people are often guided by different frameworks at different moments. Qualitatively, it would be hard for me to categorise formally the kinds of activists whose efforts I followed, although I can say that I have little first-hand experience with organisations outside of Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley, or with conservative religious organisations. There is no doubt that this is a shortcoming. However, at the same time, as someone who studied anthropology, I have consciously traded some breadth for greater depth, which despite its disadvantages, has other merits. These merits are ones that have enabled me to present in this book the kinds of grounded insights into the segment of women's rights activism with which I am acquainted (those interested in broader descriptions of gender-related civil society in Malaysia might consider other texts more dedicated to meeting that task (e.g. Rashila and Saliha 2009; Nik and Makmor 2009; Tan and Ong 2009; Lai 2003; Ng et al. 2006)).

The ability for these activists to make an impact extends beyond the local or national level. In her call for descriptions of women and organisations that have sought gender justice in ways sensitive to their contexts and cultures, Ong provides a description of how Sisters in Islam (SIS)—a member of JAG—has been 'careful about framing the problem of gender bias and violence within the Muslim ethical universe' (Ong 2011, 34). SIS's work has inspired a significant amount of academic research (e.g. Moll 2009; Ratna and Hirst 2013) as well as transnational activism. SIS is the initiating and coordinating organisation behind Musawah, whose self-described goal 'is to provide support for national and regional women's initiatives advocating for the advancement of women's human rights in Muslim contexts, including rights-based reform of Muslim family laws and the protection of existing rights within family laws' (Zainah 2009, 263; see also Basarudin 2009). The impacts of initiatives such as Musawah are several, and include, as Claudia Derichs has argued, that transnational networks 'such as Musawah illustrate that different national

contexts are not impeding the identification of common norms and principles but rather function as informative case studies from which to derive lessons for a collective struggle' (2010, 418). Musawah would also provide an example of how activists and organisations can address the problem that Nancy Fraser calls 'misframing', which 'arises when the state-territorial frame is imposed on transnational sources of injustice' (2005, 305; see also Fraser 2007, 8; Fraser 2012, 6).

However, despite the global relevance of Malaysian feminist activism, the preponderance of the efforts expended by women Malaysian activists is directed towards issues arising within national boundaries. My own research on civil society in Malaysia has focused on this intra-national activism, and has been on the ways people have striven to protect or reconstitute their rights and freedoms in Malaysia's public political realm. These realms are spaces used by some to exclude others, and used by others to defend against exclusion and marginalisation. I discuss the public sphere in Chapter 3 with reference to the important contributions by Nancy Fraser in problematising Jürgen Habermas's gender-blind conceptualisation of it. However, I wish to note here that even in private interactions, many Malaysians dare not openly speak their mind. In telephone conversations, a relative of mine regularly shifts into coded and oblique language, despite discussing relatively uninteresting personal matters. He does this in the belief that phone conversations are listened-into. And I cannot blame him given that Malaysian authorities have admitted to tapping phone conservations, although ostensibly only the communications of those suspected of criminal wrongdoing (Sipalan 2014).

How much less, then, would the inclination be for many Malaysians to express dissent openly, in the public sphere? This aversion to public protest was captured in the widespread belief that existed when I first began my fieldwork in 2003, that in Malaysia there were never any public protests. Although it is very far from the case that large scale protests were not a part of Malaysia's history (see for example Loh 2009; Swain and Chee 2004; Watson 2010; Weiss 2011), many non-activist Malaysians were surprised when they learned that I had attended a demonstration against the police in Kuala Lumpur in 2004 (described in Lee 2005). For non-activists, the fear of police and their power is visceral, and as I describe in Chapter 3, it was likewise for me during my initial research with activists.

Today, however, boldness in proximity of authority seems more common than it once was. A large contributor to this has been the large street demonstrations which now seem to be regular events. The most visible of these are those undertaken by social movement Bersih, which seeks an array of electoral reforms (Lee 2014). Attendances at these demonstrations have ranged from the tens of thousands to estimations of over 100,000, with simultaneous protests taking place in cities all around the world as part of the supporting movement Global Bersih.

While Bersih—which, incidentally, is coordinated out the offices of Empower, a JAG member organisation—has had an array of positive political impacts, the reforms it has sought have not yet been implemented. However, when the high profile artist-activist Fahmi Reza was asked by BBC journalist James Fletcher if Bersih was a success, Fahmi's reply pointed towards an impact that is of particular interest to discussions about the public sphere. 'In a way', said Fahmi, 'one of the successes of the protest is to create this culture of protest in this country. Look where we are today', he said during the conclusion of the Bersih rally of November 2016, 'hundreds of thousands of people are down on the streets protesting, and they are protesting without fear' (Fletcher 2016).

Fahmi's artist-activism has not gone unnoticed by the police and demonstrates the limits of tolerance among Malaysian powers-that-be. His images of Prime Minister Najib as a clown with the words 'Kita semua penghasut' (We are all seditious), have been circulated widely on social media and posted on walls as street art. This image was in response the prime minister's alleged role in the widely reported 1Malaysia Development Bank corruption scandal (e.g. Gabriel 2018; Ramesh 2016). In June 2016, Fahmi was charged with sedition. Fletcher, in a preamble to the podcast version of his documentary story on Fahmi, observed that 'what he [Fahmi] was doing seems in some ways innocuous; he was just drawing cartoons. And yet he was getting this strong response and pushback from the government' (Fletcher 2016). While Fletcher is right to point out the inordinance of the supposed offense and the response from authorities, it is also the case that those in power have often retaliated against those who mock them. Indeed, as Yasmin Masidi observes in Chapter 4 with respect JAG's Aiyo Wat Lah! Awards—which was an annual comedic condemnation of sexism in which people in positions of state authority are named for their misdeeds—'they don't care if you get angry at them, but they care

very much if you laugh and make fun of them. […] They can't stand people mocking them'. Thus it may be of little surprise that Fahmi, and the satirical cartoonist Zunar, have both been arrested for sedition (Ives 2016).

In concluding this Introduction, I want to note that I am conscious of that the fact that a man is the author of a book on women's rights activism and that this is something that warrants some reflection upon. Indeed one reviewer, in response to my mentioning of this issue in this Introduction's previous draft, suggested that I expand upon my reflections on this point. At the time that this book was reviewed, it lacked a concluding chapter. I knew it needed a chapter to round the book out, but at the time I was unsure of what such a conclusion should contain. Upon reading my reviewer's suggestion, it was clear to me that she had provided me its subject. Thus Chapter 5 is a brief reflection on my place, and the place of men more generally, in feminism, the ongoing need for which is too readily apparent in a world where women continue to face to broad and systematic disadvantage, bear unequal burdens, and remain poorly represented in leadership positions in many fields of human endeavour at local and global scales. This is to our universal detriment. In what follows I share some insights from women in Malaysia who are working for greater gender justice, towards which I hope this book might make some modest contribution.

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CHAPTER 2

Malaysian Feminists on Feminism and Authenticity

Authored with Nikkola Mikocki-Bleeker

Abstract In a chapter co-authored with emerging feminist writer Nikkola Mikocki-Bleeker, Lee draws on interviews with women's rights activists in Malaysia on the matter of feminism. 'Feminism' in Malaysia is often denigrated or dismissed by opponents as a cultural import from 'the West' that is inappropriate for Malaysia. It is attacked as culturally inauthentic. This chapter draws on Vivian Wee and Farida Shaheed's concept of 'indigenous feminism' and examines how some women's rights activists regard and respond to these assertions. It explores how women subjectively experience feminism as they describe the circumstances in which they encountered the concept and the extent to which they feel that 'Western' feminism is applicable to them and to the Malaysian context.

Malaysian feminism is often subject to the assertion *ini bukan budaya kita* ('this is not our culture'). Indeed, feminism is seen by some as part and parcel of an insidious package of Western influence that includes ostensibly pernicious concepts such as human rights and democracy. This rhetoric arguably reached its height in the 1990s and is captured in discussions around 'Asian values'. Nationalist politicians in Asia, such as

J. C. H. Lee, *Women's Activism in Malaysia*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78969-9_2

15

Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, argued that Asians valued the collective and social rights above those of individuals, which those in the West elevate above all else. A key protagonist in promulgating the notion of Asian values was (the now former) Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who, writes Michael Peletz,

> made it clear in interviews and public speeches that, in his view, human rights, democracy, and civil society of the sort held up as Western ideals do not work in Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Indeed, Mahathir maintains that Western ideals should not be viewed as values to strive for, and that those who suggest otherwise are arrogantly ethnocentric, if not overtly racist, and bent on seeing Muslims and others fail in Asia and elsewhere. (Peletz 2003, 4)

Peletz notes that among the specific ills of the West as identified by Mahathir and as expressed in his co-authored book *The Voice of Asia*, is the 'women's liberation movement', which has 'contributed to the corruption of the Western world' (ibid., 3; Mahathir and Ishihara 1995). Such views, which Mahathir did a great deal to legitimise, disparaged feminism and women's rights among diverse Malaysians, including, but not necessarily limited to, conservative and Muslim Malaysians.

Across Asia, feminism is seen as a Western notion (Niranjana 2010) and is 'caricatured as aggressively individualistic, anti-male, anti-children, and…anti-family' (Roces 2010, 1). In Malaysia, politicians, commentators in the media and others have regularly declaimed that Asian values and Islamically framed notions that gender differences are 'complementary' and natural are a more appropriate way to understand the place and roles of women in society. Differing gender constructions and expectations placed upon men and women have considerable impacts on their abilities to participate in the public sphere, and the imbalances here are evident in diverse ways, including women's representation in Parliament, as addressed in the following chapter. As a consequence, many Malaysian women regard themselves as feminist and believe feminism is needed in Malaysia.

In this chapter, we seek to understand the lived-experiences and views of self-identifying feminists in this context. We have sought to understand the discursive strategies that individual Malaysian feminists employ to counter claims that Malaysian feminism is culturally inauthentic. Of interest is how these women describe their experience of a society

that led them to develop views that could be called feminist, and their response to a cultural environment that is often dismissive or even hostile to this feminism.

The apparent cogency of the suggestion that feminism is 'Western' or foreign has considerable power in undermining support for feminist views. It is for this reason that Aihwa Ong, as noted in this book's Introduction, has argued for the need to study how feminist organisations effectively pursue gender justice given the cultural, ethical and political milieu in which those organisations operate. 'Astute feminist interventions', she writes, 'must always take into account the web of indigenous norms and values of female role and agency' (Ong 2011, 29).

Defining and describing what constitutes feminism is, as readers will be aware, a difficult and fraught endeavour. However, Vivian Wee and Farida Shaheed's chapter, 'Indigenous Feminisms as Resistance', charts a route towards responding to suggestions that feminism is inauthentic in non-Western contexts. Wee and Shaheed begin by arguing that

> the term 'feminism' may be understood as referring to a body of knowledge that is positioned in opposition to 'patriarchy', which may be understood as a structure that systematically advantages males and disadvantages females. There is, however, more than one such body of knowledge that may be referred to as feminism. Similarly, there is more than one patriarchal structure. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of feminisms and patriarchies. Given that human beings live in a diversity of cultures and societies, it stands to reason that plural patriarchies and feminisms that exist are embedded in diverse cultures and societies. (2016)

Wee and Shaheed go on to say that as 'No one has ever suggested that patriarchy is uniquely Western, Eastern, Northern or Southern', it is 'anomolous to question whether feminism is uniquely Western' because such a suggestion implies that 'only in the West did a body of knowledge emerge about how to resist patriarchy' (ibid.). As a consequence, Wee and Shaheed offer the term 'indigenous feminisms' to refer to 'women's endeavours of asserting their rights in their own socio-cultural context'. These endeavours are 'always dialectical', arising in response to 'oppressive others' (ibid.). Along these lines, Ng et al. (2006, 1), although acknowledging the 'influence of Western-inspired ideas on [contemporary Malaysian] women's empowerment', provide a history challenging feminism's alleged cultural inauthenticity in Malaysia. They cite examples

like women workers' mobilisation against sexual harassment prior to analogous Western movements (ibid., 57) to problematise common views that Malaysian feminists have simply appropriated Western ideas. Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (2013) likewise provides the example of a radical anticolonial women's movement, Angkatan Wanita Sedar (the Generation of Conscious Women) or AWAS (the acronym of which translates as 'danger'). AWAS advocated for 'female emancipation and national self-determination' (Aljunied 2013, 154), which challenges these concepts' mutual exclusivity.

It is with the above in mind that we use the term 'feminism' here without defining a version of it according to any established typology, other than that suggested by Wee and Shaheed. Our interviewees would recognise the diversity of views that term 'feminism' accommodates, but nevertheless use it when referring to the need to address diverse inequalities, transgressions of dignity, and violence that women in Malaysia too often experience (WAO 2012). Wee and Shaheed's valuable concept of indigenous feminisms enables us continue discussions of feminism in Malaysia and to use the term without being unduly caught up in issues of definition according to established categories.

Of great and clear import for our interviewees is the religious politics of Malaysia, which was noted in the Introduction. Much has been written on the relationship between Islam and women's rights with jaundiced views being common outside of Muslim majority contexts (e.g. ABC 2017; see also Wee and Shaheed 2016). Yet many authors have argued for feminism and Islam's compatibility. Wee and Shaheed (2008, 8) have argued that religiously founded disempowerment of women is divergent from Islam. For them, the notion that female empowerment is culturally alien is unjustifiably affirmed on the basis of 'tradition' and 'culture' (ibid., 28). Co-founder of the world-renowned Muslim feminist NGO Sisters in Islam, Norani Othman (2006, 339), similarly states that presenting feminism in opposition to 'religious, political and nationalist identities' is a 'false dichotomy'. Sisters in Islam has also actively sought to draw on the work of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, whose arguments in support of secularism and human rights (e.g. An-Na'im 2000), have gained some prominence and traction.

The above scholarly work captures some important aspects of the Malaysian women's movement's context and how feminism can be understood as a legitimately Malaysian phenomenon. Yet to add a further layer of understanding as to how these putative tensions between

feminism and culture are understood, assimilated and countered by women in Malaysia, we present insights from interviews conducted in 2016 with six Malaysian women. The interviewees were aged between 24 and 57 years, in or from Kuala Lumpur, and all were involved in the women's movement. We asked women about the kinds of claims that are made against feminism and how they respond to such claims, including the suggestion that feminism is culturally or religiously inauthentic. Although from different elements of the women's movement in Malaysia, it is not intended that they be considered as speaking on behalf of either the movement in general or for any organisation with which they might be associated. Therefore, in this chapter, all interviewees have self-selected pseudonyms. We present now some of their responses to our questions, which we have grouped into four themes: first encounters with feminism; the (ir)relevance of the label 'feminist'; critiquing the inauthenticity of feminism in Malaysia; and countering claims of inauthenticity.

'Inside You It Burns': First Encounters with Feminism

Although many women who encounter feminism have described the ways in which it changes how they see and experience the world (e.g. Estrich 2000), a noteworthy theme in the comments of the Malaysian women spoken to here was that their experience of the world as unequal greatly preceded their encounter with the concept of and writing around feminism. Zara, a 24-year-old Indian-Malaysian bisexual cis-woman, for example, described her experiences of 'pressure…about gender roles' in a former heterosexual relationship, 'as a girlfriend, as an Indian girl'. When she later encountered feminism, her unease suddenly 'click[ed] and ma[d]e sense'. She already observed 'very unfair' aspects of her parents' marriage that 'even…as a child, I already felt uncomfortable with'. Zara wondered whether these were 'examples of her [mother] being unhappy with…the role she had to take on', speculating that being a housewife 'wasn't completely her choice'.

She illustrated the gendered and unfair expectations of her as a girl growing up in an Indian-Malaysian family.

> We have family events and as a girl, I am expected [to help my aunt] in the kitchen…and the guys…they just hang outside in the living area, they get to play card games, they get to gamble, they even get to drink beers…we're

more modern as a family, but really there's a lot of pressure on still being a 'good Indian woman'…And obviously, you can't be anything but straight.

Such pressures were also felt in Chinese-Malaysian households. Alex, a 24-year-old Chinese-Malaysian woman, observed from a young age unfairness in her family and ethnic culture. She said,

> …even though I didn't know what to…label my ideals and principles, I think I noticed…discrimination quite early on…I'd be told [by my parents and society] things like 'oh you can't do this because you're a girl'… you know, 'protect yourself, don't go out so late' [and] 'it's fine if guys do that'. I think that was probably the most obvious examples of how I felt that…this is unfair. Yeah…basically a very protective, benevolent sexism.

Some traditional Chinese-Malaysian wedding practices also seemed unfair to Alex. The dowry payment from groom's to bride's family 'felt like an exchange of goods to me, it was like you were selling your daughter'. She also felt uncomfortable with feminine and masculine Cantonese verbs *to marry*, which for women 'connotes that you are going out of your family…whereas from the groom's perspective, it's like you're taking someone in', reinforcing patrilineal marriage and the centrality of men.

While Zara and Alex were equipped with feminist language from Western social media (indeed, Zara's discovery of feminism coincided with studying in the USA) both were frustrated with gender inequality before formally encountering feminism. As Alex said, 'I think my realisation was…"this isn't fair" and then later on…"oh, okay, there's a whole movement against this"'.

Two other interviewees described experiencing unfairness early on in their lives as later catalysing their feminism. Sam, a 57-year-old Sri-Lankan-Malaysian woman, said,

> …as a child growing up, you knew certain things were a bit unfair. I had three brothers, and I'm the youngest, so of course my dad used to not allow me to do things that my brothers would have done…But of course as a child growing up you can't articulate it as being discrimination.

A 38-year-old Chinese-Malaysian woman, who took the pseudonym Perempuan Malaysia (which translates as Malaysian Woman), similarly referenced childhood, saying it was 'unfair that my brother [got] this advantage, he [had] this kind of access and kind of freedom, and [I was]

expected to kind of accept it because that's…just *how it is*'. Perempuan Malaysia also spoke about her high school friends discussing gender and sexuality yet lacking language. She described how a friend of hers became pregnant at the age of sixteen.

> …at the time I think we were like 'okay' you know, like 'this happened, what should we do?', or like 'oh god, was it someone's fault?', like 'why did they not use protection?!', or like 'could they even get protection?!', like 'where do we find condoms?!'… I felt like we had a lot of questions and we just didn't know what to do. But I'm just so glad…that she had access to safe abortion. I mean at the time…that language of like 'the right to safe abortion', it's not something I would have said then. It was like 'oh my god, we have to help our friend – she cannot get pregnant, it will affect her…ability to go to school, to live'…So we talked about these things but…we didn't quite have the language.

It was not until Perempuan Malaysia was practising law and attended a workshop at the feminist organisation she now works for that she accessed language to verbalise these ideas. And while Sam 'didn't articulate it and put two and two together as…years of historical discrimination' as a child, she felt an incipient awareness of women's and human's rights: 'inside you it burns', she declared.

Through these anecdotes, the women described a latent awareness of unfairness within the family before being equipped with explicit feminist frameworks. However, Firdaus, a 24-year-old Malay Muslim feminist woman (whose chosen pseudonym is a unisex name derived from Arabic and translates as 'paradise' or 'garden'), described coming to in-essence feminist views as a result of observing her mother's role-modelling, which meant that gender equality was never 'unusual to me'. Of her mother, she said,

> …when I was growing up she worked as a quantity surveyor, which is a male-dominated field, okay? So whenever we renovated our house, she would catch [contractors] if they tried to…short change us. And, so…when I was growing up, what I used to see was her working like that – nine to five – while at the same time making sure that we had [done everything we needed to do]…So that was my normal: my normal was seeing my mum doing the same things as my dad, and more, right?…And interestingly enough, stepping out of that and realising other people's mums…were expected, to be in the kitchen and all of that. And then I realised 'oh wait, my mum is a feminist!'

According to Firdaus, her mother did not embrace the feminist label, yet she was still an inspiring feminist role model. Indeed, when she encountered feminism at a British university, Firdaus said,

> I didn't relate to it at all because the experience was sitting in a class with middle-class British students talking about the brown woman's experience of female genital mutilation. You know, a group of middle-class British kids talking about the hijab, and it's like [sigh]…

Significantly, Firdaus could not place herself within the Western feminist discussion, despite its subject matter ostensibly being her Muslim experience. This echoes others' warnings of a colonial discourse about saving 'brown women from brown men' (Hasan 2012, 59). For Firdaus, feminism was her personal, arguably religious and cultural, 'normal'.

Transcending Language: Feminism by Any Other Name

For almost all interviewees, encountering feminist discourse catalysed latent dispositions from their youth. Although feminist values were important to them and for Malaysia, they felt that the label of feminism was often beside the point. Many Malaysians thus champion feminist ideals without calling themselves feminist.

When asked about the way Malaysian feminism is sometimes regarded as a middle-class, urban, English-speaking concern in Malaysia, rais nur, a 48-year-old Nyonya woman, responded,

> …if you were to look for people who subscribe to the term, then yes, that observation would probably be right. But I think if you remove the label and you talk about the concept of not believing that men and women should be treated unequally, then there are by far…many more women I would say out there who subscribe to this belief.

Sam and Perempuan Malaysia echoed this. Sam, a lawyer, referred to a forum that her organisation had recently conducted during which there was 'uproar' among law students in response to trans*[1] and VAW issues. Yet Sam maintained, 'if you break it down to most people in simple language without using the word "feminism"' most people would not want 'this woman or man to be hurt', irrespective of whether it was a trans* or

cis-gendered victim of violence. She also said in rural settings like 'villages or in the estates – there are…people who talk about empowerment'. While this empowerment may not be called feminism, it is in effect feminism. Similarly, Perempuan Malaysia said, 'Just because people don't use that word doesn't mean that they aren't embodying that spirit'.

Alex also believed there was 'a divide in…people's understandings of feminism' and what feminism is. She said Malaysians she knew 'do believe in basic gender equality principles but whether they see it as… feminist is a different thing'. Zara similarly understood why women of colour would say they are 'womanist' rather than feminist, yet she felt that 'it doesn't really matter'.

Indeed, Perempuan Malaysia thought this could be a Malaysian feminist strategy. She called it 'reclaim[ing] the language of feminism', seeking to show cultural relevance by identifying historical and contemporary examples such as the women's rights coalition her organisation is part of. For Perempuan Malaysia, 'while…[Malaysians] may not have used the words "feminist" and "feminism", the ideals…that encapsulate feminism and feminist ideals, *are* actually…part of the culture'. Analogously, Firdaus described her Muslim feminist organisation's work showing feminism is part of Malaysians' 'lived reality'. She described workshops where participants are asked, 'Are men the sole head of the household?' She said because most are single mothers, responses are: 'I'm already the head of the household, I am a single mother, I am there'. Thus, 'reality shows that women are already taking up those…roles…supposed to be carried out by men'.

These diverse examples demonstrate that it was largely irrelevant as to whether Malaysians doing feminist work embraced the label. It was more important to pursue practical feminist goals rather than attempting to convince people to identify as feminist. Thus feminism *is* part of Malaysia's cultural tradition.

Reflecting on Claims of Cultural Inauthenticity

With the label of feminism being largely irrelevant, the women were asked about their thoughts on people's motivations for making claims that feminism is culturally inauthentic; what the grounds are for these claims; and the wider sociopolitical environment in which they are made.

Motivations

For Firdaus, feminism challenges the privileged position of men in high positions, particularly in the workplace. Feminism will 'shake their reality', because 'if you're used to a certain level of privilege then when it's shaken you're going to hate it'. Alex echoed this and noted that feminism was difficult for some because it necessitated confronting 'personal' views on women. rais nur also spoke about how 'most of the people who are in control in public spaces are men' who need to continue feeling in control. rais nur therefore speculated whether reactions against feminism were perhaps actually against 'women…telling them what to do', wondering whether the 'crisis of masculinity within households' in which men assert control might be owing to women's growing representation in tertiary institutions and workplaces.

Zara spoke more specifically about what she saw as patriarchal Indian-Malaysian culture and how feminism *is* going to dismantle 'traditions' that 'are really sexist', meaning men will lose 'a lot of power and control [that their] culture has put…in place for them'. Similarly, Sam spoke about people denying women's and human rights because of 'privileges they have culturally and traditionally and religiously'.

Thus, while Firdaus, rais nur and Alex spoke generally about the way that feminism would erode men's personal privilege, both Zara and Sam emphasised the *cultural* dimension (see also Lee 2016; Lee et al. 2016). It is worth mentioning privilege is an obstacle universal to feminism no matter which culture feminists work within. Universality of privilege shows it is not a culturally specific problem to Malaysian feminism. Yet the fact that there are different feminisms grappling with the same issues demonstrates that women have universal experiences of oppression (Bhasin and Khan 1986; Ng et al. 2006) and that 'culture' is frequently invoked in justifying or normalising oppression.

When exploring the origins of claims that feminism is culturally inauthentic, only one respondent somewhat validated the potential motivation behind them. Perempuan Malaysia said, 'in terms of the [feminist] texts that's available, and the research that's available…the truth is most of it…is coming from [the West]'. While Perempuan Malaysia still thought feminism in Malaysia was authentic, as de facto feminism was not new in Malaysia, her views suggest why Malaysians may see feminism as foreign. If most feminist texts have 'Western' origins, it would be difficult for Malaysians to relate to this conceptual frame, as Firdaus' experience with British feminism demonstrates.

Grounds for Citing Feminism as Inauthentic

Some respondents gave common reasons they had heard for Malaysian feminism's supposed cultural inauthenticity. From a Malay Muslim perspective, Firdaus spoke about a Quranic verse that she says is known as the 'DNA of patriarchy', Verse 4:34 (cf. Nada and Mohamad 2010). She thought this verse was,

> …the reason…people say feminism isn't compatible in Malaysia. They're like, 'go back to the Quran and it says men are supposed to be the protectors and providers', right?

Others made reference to Asian culture and values as being grounds cited for undermining feminism. Conflating feminism with human rights, Sam felt that many would believe that it is human rights that should yield to culture, that 'human rights should be tailor made to fit the Asian culture'. And speaking of the way that Asian culture ostensibly requires women to be gentle and demur (e.g. Tong and Turner 2008, 50), almost every respondent mentioned the stereotype of the angry, 'man-hating', 'bra-burning' feminists. With the exception of rais nur, all referenced 'bra-burning' as a key image conjured in the Malaysian public eye regarding feminism. As Zara said, questioning the stereotype,

> Most feminists are not going around trying to burn bras or trying to chop off your dick because you're a man. We don't hate men, we don't want to kill you…

This almost unanimous 'bra-burning' image originates from a demonstration outside the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, USA, in 1968. While no bras were in fact burned, they were thrown into a 'Freedom Trash Can' (Ulrich 2007, 198–199), and history has rendered bra-burning feminists a subversive stereotype. Given the image's Western origin (although admittedly many who reference it may not know its history), it is striking that many respondents regularly encountered it.

The Sociopolitical Environment

All respondents noted the importance and relevance of the wider sociopolitical environment in which claims against feminism are made in Malaysia. Perempuan Malaysia and rais nur spoke about politicised

religion and dominance of the state: that they both stifle open discussion and debate. Perempuan Malaysia said, 'what happens…[in the] political stratosphere…*does* trickle down to your Islamist NGOs, and to your students on the street'. 'Politicised religion', she said, was 'shrinking democratic spaces'. Echoing some of the discussion in Chapter 1 of this book, rais nur expanded on the 'role…of political Islam in closing off spaces for people to question'.

> …in the first place there's not much room for anyone to ask questions about anything…And because we have been basically taught not to ask questions, it also means…everything has been dumbed down, including the local education system…and on the other hand you have an economic system that compels people to basically spend time working all the time… in order to make more money, in order to be able to survive…So, in light of these two…considerations, I think to talk about feminism is quite challenging because you can't actually convince a lot of people that it's needed, right?

Zara lamented public feminist discussion being 'almost…a joke' in the public and political sphere. She added that when menstruation is referred to, it 'is being made as like a joke in such a negative way. I feel like when gender and sexuality is being brought up it's just immediately shot down, it's being attacked in the most ridiculous way'. Sam added that 'when MPs make sexist comments in Parliament, it's trivialised', and when her organisation argued for a parliamentary 'moral code of conduct…it was like a non-issue'.

Alex and Firdaus focused on the public approval of 'feminism'. For example, Firdaus said a general lack of acceptance, as well as lack of a perceived need for feminism, is owing to 'so many images and videos of what you're supposed to be like as a woman in the mainstream media'. Such ideas about appropriate female conduct were founded, she thought, in 'set-in-stone cultural values'.

Understanding the environment in which Malaysian feminism functions is important to understanding the cultural authenticity debate, in particular, because representatives of the state regularly argue that feminism and other activisms are not 'Malaysian' (Watson 2010; see also Elias 2015). The strength of the Malaysian state and religious and cultural grounding on which anti-feminist claims are made also make it difficult—although by no means impossible—to respond to.

'What Exactly Doesn't Fit?': Responding to Claims of Cultural Inauthenticity

The above outlines the terrain that feminist women in Malaysia must navigate in pursuit of a more just society for Malaysian women. For the women spoken to here, strategies used to respond to claims that feminism has no place in Malaysia made use of a variety of discursive strategies that were drawn on in both public and personal interactions.

Of the latter, Alex and Zara described strategies that they used in conversational contexts. Alex found that discussing the issue of violence against women (VAW) was the best 'route, because…that's the most apparent form of sexism, and an extreme one'. VAW showed 'this is not… exclusive to Western worlds, it happens in our backyards'. Malaysian feminist focus on VAW is common (Ng et al. 2006; Ariffin 1999, 422), being an accessible example and one that few would dispute.

Zara framed her arguments that she had with 'guy friends' for feminism's cultural authenticity even more personally.

> …like okay…you say that 'your mum is happy and she's fine'. I'm like, 'think about it – your mum goes to work and she has to take care of you. Did you not notice times when she's so stressed out, and when she wants to stop?' And obviously there are times like that. So…I like to bring it to a more personal level for them to be able to think about it in their own lives… And then I talk about my personal experiences with how…I had so many experiences with people I know who've had sexual abuse and harassment…It's a continuous worry thinking about things like that. But as a man, they don't necessarily have to worry about that. So kind of giving examples and making it more relatable…

Interesting here is how Zara and Alex sidestep the question of culture. The strategies they employ bypass the highly politicised culture question altogether, aiming instead for their interlocutors' lifeworlds. What Zara and Alex seem intent on proving to claimants of cultural inauthenticity is that gender inequality is something that is real in the lives of people they know, and their family, and has impacts that they surely could not consent to.

Other strategies seek to confront the ostensible cultural and religious grounds that legitimise inequality. Firdaus sought to counter the 'literal understanding' that many Muslims have of Quranic verses—particularly the aforementioned 4:34, that many assume means men are God-given

'protectors and providers'. For Firdaus, this involved demonstrating the Quran requires contextual human interpretation (*fiqh*) of Allah's law (*shariah*). While once men had more rights and wealth than women, 'it's no longer that setting' in Malaysia. Therefore, Firdaus says, when taken in today's context Verse 4:34 means that 'there's shared responsibility together. You take responsibility and you protect each other'.

This equal provision exemplifies the 'radical reconceptualisations' of Islamic knowledge Muslim feminist organisations embark upon (Moll 2009, 41). Firdaus, and other Malaysian Muslims who search for a feminist *fiqh* (Ong 1999), are part of wider tradition arguing for Malaysian feminism's cultural authenticity. Interpreting the Quran for the contemporary Malaysian context demonstrates that feminism is compatible with Islam (Wee and Shaheed 2008).

Sam and rais nur pursued educational approaches responding to Malaysian feminism's alleged cultural inauthenticity. rais nur preferred running programmes on feminism with members of the public, rather than continuing to engage, as women's organisations seem so often to do, by releasing statements to the press protesting one or another transgression against women's dignity. Within her women lawyers' organisation, Sam also focused on training programmes, performing 'training every four months looking at law from a feminist perspective' with chambering students. Through this, Sam examined both *shariah* and civil law with a gendered lens. When asked about her approach to tackling the issues and impacts of culture, policy and the law, Sam said,

> …that's how I would voice [feminism] in terms of laws and policies, and how…culture was meant to bind us. It's not meant to…separate us or differentiate us. It's like, how we say, '1Malaysia'. It's supposed to bind us. And so religion too, it's meant to bind us…Maybe we practice [the same values] differently but why do we want to hurt one another in the process, yeah?!

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to gain insight into the ways in which these Malaysian women encountered and came to understand feminism, and how the concept was overlaid—often imperfectly—upon their life experiences, and then became a way by which their experiences were understood, even if the formal label of 'feminism' was not always highly regarded. What can be seen are the 'dialectics' of feminism to which Wee

and Shaheed pointed when describing how feminism comes into being in grounded contexts. In this case, in addition to arising in response to 'oppressive others', it develops in response to globalised ideas that come under the banner 'feminism', as encountered through literature or in classrooms. We can see from our interviewees that their feminism is indigenously arising, and globally informed, as well as locally executed, as when they deploy context-sensitive strategies to counter anti-feminist viewpoints.

The above also gives us insights into some of the values and perspectives of activist women, which in turn shapes how they regard and respond to the world around them, whether it is specific events that require protest or an unjust status quo. In the following chapter, I describe an intervention by a group of women who re-formed the Women's Candidacy Initiative, which had participated in Malaysia's 1999 General Elections, to participate in the Malaysian General Elections of 2008 with a view to challenging one particular unsatisfactory status quo— the ongoing under-representation of women in Malaysia's Parliament. This under-representation was seen to have consequences for the voices and issues of Malaysian women in being adequately aired and considered in Malaysia's foremost institution of democracy.

NOTE

1. Use of the asterisk in the term trans* represents inclusion of more gender identities than just transgender. It refers to many different identities that differ from cis-gendered man or woman. A (non-exhaustive) list can be found at: http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/.

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The Women's Candidacy Initiative

Abstract Lee recalls his first-hand and formative experiences with a campaign during the 2008 General Elections in Malaysia in which women's activists sought to promote more women into Malaysia's Parliament, where they are under-represented. This chapter focuses on the grounded circumstances that led to the campaign that year of the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) and how they came to be formulated as a theatrical and entertaining voter education campaign despite initial plans to put forward an actual independent female electoral candidate. This campaign, which gained global and local media attention, explores a number of aspects about the public sphere in Malaysia as it relates women. This chapter also argues against 'success' as a criterion of importance in judging civil society ventures.

Keywords Malaysia · Public sphere · Women in politics · Democracy
Success

In the fortnight before Malaysia's General Elections in March 2008, I sat with blank placards and marker pens on a cool floor beneath a whirring ceiling fan in a bungalow house in Kuala Lumpur. I sat there with friends, some younger, some older than my 31-year-old self, thinking of slogans for our campaign to educate voters about the hurdles that women face in having their voices heard in and issues addressed by Malaysia's Parliament. The Women's Candidacy Initiative, or WCI

as we referred to it, wanted to draw attention to the array of reasons that have led to the ongoing under-representation of women in Malaysia's political system where, even in 2013 at the last elections (at the time of writing), which saw the addition of just one female parliamentarian, five states had no female representatives at all at the federal level and just 24 of the 292 federal parliamentary seats were won by women (Martin 2013; see also Ng 2011a, 13).

As we all sat on that floor with materials bought from a nearby stationery shop, thinking of ways to convey the diverse issues facing women in Malaysia, I experienced a moment of sadness and smallness. On the way to the bungalow I had seen the vast resources and professional advertisements being deployed expansively and expensively by the Barisan Nasional (see also Lee 2007, 46–48). I compared their resources with ours—which would have been familiar to any child doing a poster assignment for school—and wondered what we were really doing, and despaired as to what we could achieve.

However, just moments later, I was invigorated with pride and admiration for the women around me; I realised that what was happening on that floor was important. What WCI was doing was challenging notions about who could and ought to participate in Malaysia's democratic processes. A key characteristic of being a citizen in a democracy is the ability to participate in elections. Elections are something we tend to think of as being contested and dominated by major political parties with their powerful machinery and their war chests of campaign funds provided, at least in part, by wealthy and powerful donors. Instead, WCI sought to make the *kratos* (power, or *kuasa* in Malay) of the *demos* (people, or *rakyat*) something that could be exerted by women in Malaysia, women independent of the powerful parties. WCI was creating a space in which women could engage with the processes of democracy, to have their issues heard and to demand of their would-be representatives that they address their issues.

By drawing on the creativity and vitality of younger activists, WCI crafted a youthful and media-savvy campaign formulated around a fictional character called Mak Bedah who had a 'shopping list' of ten demands (which are described later) that she took to diverse candidates in Malaysia's 2008 elections to ask them where they stood with respect to the items on that list and the issue of women's representation in Malaysia' Parliament. By drawing on the networks of its more established activists, Mak Bedah succeeded in confronting candidates in public about

her views and used these occasions to publicise WCI's agenda through local and international media, including *Al Jazeera* and the front pages of national publications (e.g. Phang 2008; Chin 2008). However, although WCI made a splash in 2008, with one paper even reporting that 'Mak Bedah hogs the limelight' (The Star 2008), this achievement was not what WCI had intended at the outset of their campaign.

A Shopping List

WCI participated in its first elections in 1999 when it fielded Zaitun 'Toni' Kasim for the seat of Selyang, in Selangor. By putting Toni forward as a candidate, WCI sought to promote a number of demands including having women occupying 30% of policymaking positions; the repeal of oppressive laws; and raising the awareness of Malaysian citizens of their rights and powers in democratic processes (Martinez 2004, 90).

Although Toni formally ran as a candidate for the Democratic Action Party, and although her campaign also received some support (such as with personal security of campaign members) from volunteers from Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), the driving force and the campaign's ethos were shaped by a team of female volunteers who strove to foster an atmosphere that recognised that those participating—none of whom had ever participated in an election campaign before—varied greatly in their abilities, the time at their disposal, and their level of comfort in what is a high-energy and high-pressure endeavour. Toni explained to me during a conversation in 2008 that

> Because women often have multiple duties at home and work, we were flexible with letting people contribute time when they were able to. We weren't hardnosed about it like other political parties who demanded that you gave 150%. And we only got people to do things they were comfortable doing. We didn't make anyone climb poles [to hang party flags from]. Some women just felt they could run the office, or even just clean it, because that was what they knew. One woman just wanted to give people massages when they needed one because that was what she knew. We gave people the space to contribute in the way they wanted. And in the evening we sat in a circle to talk about how the day went.

Toni went on to tell me that the male volunteers provided by PAS did not understand WCI's campaign; it differed so greatly from what they

were used to. However, the creation of this difference—the act of bringing it into being—was one of WCI's objectives. It wanted to be a model for how democracy could take place in a way that enabled women to participate in elections and was not based on a model that had largely evolved in response to the freedoms and privileges that men enjoy (without them realising it for the most part) and that most women do not have.

WCI's emergence in 1999, and its perspectives on women's place in the public sphere, did not come from nowhere. As outlined by Martinez (2004, 77–86), an array of women's civil society organisations had, in the months prior to WCI's campaign, created the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC) (Xavier and Chin Abdullah 1999). This document, which was endorsed by 76 organisations, described difficulties faced by women in eleven areas of life and recommended how the Malaysian government should respond to address them. The document, note tan beng hui and Cecilia Ng, 'initially emerged in the context of the economic crisis in late 1997 and in response to the forthcoming general elections' (tan and Ng 2003, 112–113; cf. Martinez 2004, 80).

Martinez, who was involved in WCI's 1999 campaign, also notes that WCI emerged from the movement behind the WAC and that WCI was the result of 'the recognition that the political participation of women at every level of decision making is vital to advance and maintain the rights of women and to represent their concerns' (ibid.). Thus WCI formed to support non-partisan female candidates who would run on an explicitly women's platform. In 1999, however, although WCI's campaign resulted in a number of achievements (to which I return in a later section of this chapter), Toni did not unseat the incumbent candidate, Chan Kong Choy of the Malaysian Chinese Association (who had won his seat in the previous election with 73% of the votes, but whose winning margin shrank in his contest with WCI in 1999 to 57% (see also Weiss 2000, 423–424)).

In 2008, WCI reformed in advance of the General Elections that year, and had intended to reprise its role of supporting into Parliament an independent woman who would, once again, champion women's issues. WCI's candidate was again to be Toni (Phang 2008). Owing to my friendship with Toni, I happily accepted her invitation to be part of her campaign. However, I never got to campaign for her. On 19 February, five days prior to nomination day, Toni withdrew her candidacy owing to ill health, the news of which made front-page of *The Sun* newspaper

(Phang 2008). In the short space of time available to WCI, a replacement candidate was not found. But rather than have volunteers disperse themselves into diverse other campaigns and have its agenda go unarticulated, WCI developed an alternative campaign—a voter education campaign—that revolved around a fictional character called Mak Bedah (Aunty Bedah).

Mak Bedah was intended to represent an ordinary Malaysian woman who was fed up with an array of aspects of Malaysian life, especially those that affected women. She wanted to highlight the array of barriers that made her participation in elections and politics so challenging. As well as a public sphere in which politicians regularly made sexist and misogynist comments and which were routinely un-denounced, these hurdles also included that Malaysia has among the highest election deposits in the world. In a context where this deposit will be lost by a candidate if she does not garner a sufficient proportion of the votes, and where women earn far less than men, these election deposits are a forbidding hurdle (Lee 2011a, 369–370).

Mak Bedah's characterisation had a number of features. Sartorially, any woman playing the role Mak Bedah in public would wear a white t-shirt bearing the slogan 'Shopping for a Real Candidate', and a purple selandang—a kind of headscarf that is sometimes, although not exclusively, worn by Muslim women in Malaysia. The fact that the selandang is ethnically ambiguous was an intentional feature. Those in WCI were from across the spectrum of ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia and also saw the tense ethnic politics of Malaysia as a genuine impediment to the articulation and realisation of women's issues which invariably became dissipated by the refracting ethno-religious lens through which every issue in Malaysia increasingly passes (Ng 2011b, 328–329; see also Holst 2012; Fee and Appadurai 2011). Thus, Mak Bedah was, as I have described elsewhere, supra-ethnic (Lee 2013).

Because WCI's objective in 2008 was the raising of awareness among voters and candidates of issues affecting women, and because the media's reporting of Mak Bedah's activities would be a key part of its goals, the creation of spectacle was important. Thus, not only would a woman playing the role of Mak Bedah be evidently 'in character' and theatrically playing a role, it was decided that multiple women would play Mak Bedah at any given time during an encounter with a politician who was on the campaign trail. The comedic and visually engaging aspects of Mak Bedah combined with the theatre of the encounter between Mak Bedah

and established candidates on the campaign trail, were intended to, and indeed seemed to, make it more likely for journalists to write articles about Mak Bedah and her views. The playful nature of Mak Bedah probably enabled editors to feel as if they could safely run coverage of WCI without risking their newspaper's licence to publish, which can be devastatingly and unilaterally revoked by the government (Zaharom and Wang 2004). The media presence achieved by Mak Bedah is reflected in a report from *The Star*—Malaysia's highest circulating English newspaper—in which it is evident that the reader will have encountered Mak Bedah before (whether in person or in the media), and also be aware of the multiplicity of Mak Bedah.

> Mak Bedah has gone shopping again.
>
> Not having found what – or rather who – they wanted at PJ Selatan, Mak Bedah decided to come over to PJ Utara to 'shop for a real candidate'.
>
> …
>
> 'Mak Bedah is a symbol of women calling for gender equality, transparency and local council elections from the government. We are also looking for a candidate who is accessible to the ordinary citizen,' said a Mak Bedah. (Phang 2008)

The shopping motif in the campaign referenced in the article is in reference to the shopping list noted earlier. A shopping list might not seem like a promising tool with which to question the absence of women from Malaysia's political sphere. It could be seen as reaffirming stereotypical gender domains in which women occupy the private and domesticate sphere. Such segregation may be problematic for not only reinforcing a vision of the public sphere as a male domain (Lister 1997, 9), but also because women's contributions can come to be restricted to 'women's projects' (Goetz 1988, 482–483). Furthermore, it could be seen as reinforcing neoliberal values towards personal accumulation and acquisition. Fraser has critiqued feminism's inadvertent role in supporting the defence and legitimation of neoliberalism on diverse fronts. For example, Fraser writes that 'the feminist turn to identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality' and that this occurred just when 'circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy' (Fraser 2013).

Before defending the 'shopping list', I should also recall first that citizenship itself has been argued as being a concept that is implicitly (and problematically) male (e.g. Vargas 2002, 210; Francisco 2003, 25). Ruth Lister has noted that

> the gendered division of domestic labor and time similarly privileges male citizens. The notion of political participation as an obligation thus runs the risk of casting out from the body of citizens all those unable to meet its demanding requirements, and of creating another source of self-criticism for already overburdened women. (1997, 9)

The ability of men to historically meet the demands of citizenship, writes Lister, 'was facilitated by the ranks of non-citizens—women and slaves' (Lister 1997, 8–9). With this in mind, could the deployment of a 'shopping list' by WCI be regarded as counterproductive? Would a more gender-neutral tool not have been better to reconceive women as being rightfully untied from the domestic space?

I would say no, because to do so would be to invoke a 'gender-neutral' conceptualisation of citizenship. As Lister has argued, this would 'require women, as the price of their admission to citizenship, to adapt to a template fashioned in a male image and would ignore how the body politic denies the body female' (ibid., 17). What needs to take place is not that women be unmoored from the domestic sphere, but that we need to 'problematize men's relationship to citizenship which is built on their freedom from caring responsibilities that in turn constrain women's citizenship both as a status and a practice' (Lister 1997, 19–20; see also Wieringa 1994, 831–832; Fraser 2007, 12; 2012, 7). Therefore, far from being expunged, the domestic sphere, as represented by a shopping list, can be seen as an important and appropriate introduction into the public sphere and the practice of citizenship.

Furthermore, we should take a look at the specific contents of Mak Bedah's 'shopping list'. These are the items on 'Mak Bedah's Shopping List', as enumerated on one of the placards created under the whirring ceiling fan in the bungalow house described at the start of this chapter.

1. Democracy for all!
2. Society that doesn't discriminate
3. Rights to basic freedoms and human rights
4. Transparent, corruption-free government

5. Safe, violence-free society
6. Good, affordable standard of living for all
7. End to privatisation of healthcare and other basic needs
8. End to unfair, oppressive laws
9. End to forced evictions
10. Responsible, equitable and sustainable development

At first glance, the relationship between the demands on this list bears little obvious relationship with women's issues. However, as has been well established in the literature (e.g. Benería and Feldman 1992; Francisco 2007), women are disproportionately affected by processes that might seem abstract or 'macro' (such as the privatisation of healthcare (e.g. Gilmour 2002; Lippman 1999)). Members of WCI were aware of this and, indeed, the WAC comprehensively articulated how women were especially impacted by such issues in the Malaysian context (Xavier and Chin Abdullah 1999; Martinez 2004).

Furthermore, this list acts to subvert the confinement of women's voices into 'women's issues'. Anne Marie Goetz notes that when women's voices are restricted to '"women's projects", women's perspectives are kept from being heard at any other levels of development' (1988, 482). Thus, irrespective of the fact that women can be especially negatively affected by broad and large issues, it is important for women to assert their stake in them to demonstrate the inappropriateness of their exclusion in debates and actions around them. Doing so also enables the fostering of alliances across social movements which are important if, as Shirin R. Rai argues, 'the feminist challenge is not to be limited' (2001, 2). That WCI cites issues such as forced evictions and the privatisation of healthcare and basic needs as among its concerns additionally expands its ambit beyond those of the middle classes who are less affected by or can better cope with—or perhaps be advantaged by—the impacts of 'development' and measures to stimulate 'modernisation' (e.g. Nadarajah 2007; see also Francisco 2003, 24–25).

And finally, in view of Fraser's comments earlier, what I hope to be demonstrating in this chapter is that WCI's efforts were in support of making the public sphere more accessible to women. In her prescriptions for addressing the co-option of feminism by neoliberalism, Fraser's final recommendation is that feminists '[reclaim] the mantle of participatory democracy as a means of strengthening the public powers needed to constrain capital for the sake of justice' (Fraser 2013).

However, even though I am both male and middle class—traits that Fraser argues define the public sphere as promulgated by Jürgen Habermas (Fraser 1990)—I confess that I found engagement with the public sphere during election campaigns to be, at times, frightening. Recalling some of these moments, which I do below, highlights the importance of the fifth item on Mak Bedah's shopping list—a safe, violence-free society—and underscores the considerable distance yet to be travelled in creating a public sphere that not only might tolerate, but welcome and respect, the presence of not just women, but others who do not fit the narrow prescriptions of those who belong in it.

The Public Sphere

During its campaign in 2008, WCI had a dozen encounters with electoral candidates from across the spectrum of incumbent and opposition parties.[1] One of candidates selected by WCI to speak with was Nurul Izzah Anwar, candidate for Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) in the seat of Lembah Pantai. Nurul Izzah was a high profile candidate in view of her high profile father, Anwar Ibrahim, and she was holding a *ceramah* (public talk) in a car park in (what is now) her constituency. The half-dozen of us in the Mak Bedah team that night parked our car and proceeded to the venue. What we saw was a car park emptied of cars, but filled with people who had come to hear her speak. I was apprehensive.

My apprehensions were several. First, Toni Kasim had coached me during our participation in public rallies (e.g. Lee 2005, 121–125) to take note of all the exits at one's disposal lest one should suddenly need to make a getaway. This car park had no exit other than the one we were using to enter it, and between that exit and the candidate was a small sea of people. My second apprehension lay in my uncertainty as to how the crowd would receive us. They might see us, with our placards and uniform of purple selandangs (and bandanas for Mak Bedah's male supporters), as unwanted intruders, disrupters and feminists, and turn on us. We discussed the situation briefly and if my companions had been as subservient to their anxieties as me, we would have retreated. But we did not. With my anxieties barely in check, I followed the Mak Bedahs as they led our intrusion through the crowd, whose reaction was not at all what I anticipated.

I had expected people in the crowd to be at least indignant at us for pushing in front of them, or at worst hostile to our presence. Instead, to

my surprise and to my relief, our procession towards the stage was welcomed; people, far from making our lives hard, made way for us. Instead of seeing us as disturbing the event, they thought that we were part of it. What transpired then turned out to be an unexpected highlight of the campaign. After Nurul Izzah had finished addressing the audience she gave one of our Mak Bedahs a considerable amount of time to listen to why we were there and what we had to say. The rest of us stood nearby and raised our placards above our heads. We later learned that the exchange went well and that Nurul Izzah had—despite being herself a woman seeking election for the first time—seemed not to be aware of the array of issues that were enumerated to her. (Perhaps, as the daughter of an established politician with the machinery of her party behind her, she was less aware of the hurdles to participation faced by ordinary women.)

On the one hand the above vignette can be seen as a tale about what can happen if you confront fears. You might find that those around do not oppose you as you imagined and might instead support you. It could be seen as a cautionary tale to not make assumptions as to how you will be perceived and treated. What the tale means is, of course, indefinite. But here, I want to use it to highlight how participating in the public sphere can be for anyone something that poses considerable challenges and one that is shot through with legitimately founded fears for one's wellbeing. The event in question took place under darkened night skies and, as the Reclaim the Night movement makes clear, whether globally (McKay 2015) or in Malaysia (Chan 2010), women do not move freely and safely at night.

The impediments that women's unfree access to the night world poses are more significant than they might initially seem. As Toni and others in WCI pointed out to me, many of the meetings and negotiations—whether formal or informal—that take place in political parties take place at night time, sometimes into the 'small hours' of the morning. As well as requiring women to move around at uncomfortable and unsafe hours of the day (unless accompanied by a man or men), such times are impractical when women bear the burden of childcare, which often impacts women's engagement in politics and activism (Munro 2001, 6). Thus, even though Goetz recommends the 'infiltration' by women into parties as a means of exerting influence (2004, 139), the practices of parties often make it difficult for this to occur, which was one reason among many that WCI emphasises the importance of supporting *independent* women candidates.

However, as we discovered, daylight is no guarantee of physical safety. A few days after our encounter with Nurul Izzah, WCI together with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) (which is the subject of the next chapter), travelled to the constituency of Sungai Siput, to protest the sexist comments of Samy Vellu (Koshy 2008; Amir 2007, 50), the incumbent candidate and the then President of the Malaysian Indian Congress—a component party of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition. At Sungai Siput, the Mak Bedah team split into two, with half (including myself) engaging with Samy Vellu's challenger, Jeyakumar Devaraj, who was running as a PKR candidate. The other half of the WCI team went to a public event in support of Samy Vellu. The fears that I had for myself at Nurul Izzah's *ceramah* were realised for the Mak Bedahs who went to challenge Samy Vellu. Not only were they obstructed from entering the event by fifty men, but one pushed Yati Krapawi and another aggressively broke Meera Samanther's placard. And when Samy Vellu himself arrived, he shouted 'I do not want to talk to you. Go away. You all can do what you want' (see Lau 2008). However, even after the Mak Bedahs left the venue to recover with a drink at a nearby stall, six men sat on a nearby table and intimidated them with obscene and sexually aggressive language including '*Ini saya punya lancau, saya boleh kongkek siapa saja*' ('This is my dick, I can fuck whoever I want') (Lee 2011a, 369).

While those who bullied Mak Bedah in Sungai Siput where non-state actors (despite being supporters of an incumbent politician), it is worth noting that state actors also cast a significant shadow of fear and suspicion over the activities of activists. Toni recalled to me one day that at one point during her career as an activist in Malaysia, she had been thought of by some people as being an informant to the police. This was because, unlike most of the other highly active activists with whom she worked, she had somehow always managed to avoid being arrested or put into lock-up. Although by the time she related this to me no one suspected her of this any more, what the recollection demonstrates is the pervasive notion among activists that one may well be being surveilled, and that not everyone might be as they seem (see also Lee 2010, 120–123). The presence of personnel from the Special Branch of the police, referred to as SBs, was regarded as ubiquitous, and accordingly, the ongoing assumption was that one's activities were being monitored.

Although many activists, including those in WCI, were inured to the presence of SBs, one can imagine the fear that their real or imagined

presence would invoke in a regular citizen. This fear can be visceral and I felt it during the first election campaign I participated in. One evening in 2004 while volunteering for the (ultimately unsuccessful) campaign of PKR candidate Sivarasa Rasiah in Petaling Jaya Selatan, a companion identified to me an SB leaning against my car during a *ceramah* we were assisting with. I still recall how sick-in-the-stomach I felt at that moment and a desire to run away somewhere. I can fully appreciate why anyone would forgo involvement in an electoral campaigns—or even visiting the *ceramah* of an opposition candidate—because of the fear of being seen to be supporting the opposition.

For the women in WCI, however, their long-term activism meant that SBs were part and parcel of their environment. Through my association with these women, I too became more emboldened than I could ever have imagined. One evening after WCI campaigners had confronted a candidate from the ruling coalition, an SB approached us to find out more about us. However, rather than quail at his approach and his questions, the women I was with began to tease him in a manner that was both merciless and good-natured. I watched this and was awed. And so inspired was I by their chutzpah that soon after this, while handing out leaflets at a nearby night market, I realised that one of the people I had given a pamphlet to was another SB. Although we had nothing to hide, I saw no reason to make his life too easy, and so, emulating the boldness of the women I was with, I said to the man, 'Oh, I'm sorry. That flyer has a mistake on it'. He then allowed me to take it back from him on the implied understanding that I would then give him another flyer that did not have a mistake on it. This I simply didn't do.

Despite the bravado I osmotically absorbed from the women in WCI, my experiences with them do highlight issues with the way the public sphere is conceived as being open to women. These issues are by no means peculiar to Malaysia, and Fraser has articulated a critique of Habermas' description of the public sphere, which she also describes as an 'indispensible resource' on the subject (Fraser 1990, 56). For Habermas, the public sphere is a space in which public opinion is formed and to which access 'is guaranteed to all citizens' (Habermas 1974, 49). 'A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body', which, he writes, then behaves neither 'like business or professional people transacting private affairs'. He goes on to say that 'Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the

guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest' (ibid.; see also Habermas 1984, 1989).

Fraser has noted that Habermas' conception of the public sphere does well in enabling us to 'to keep in view the distinctions between state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations, distinctions that are essential to democratic theory' (Fraser 1990, 57). However, in a critique of it that is especially relevant for women's rights activism, she notes a number of assumptions in his conception of the public sphere that warrant examination. These include (i) that participants in the public sphere can 'bracket status differentials' including gender, 'and deliberate "as if" they were social equals'; (ii) that discussions in the public sphere should be about common goods and not self or private interests; and (iii) that the public sphere 'requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state' (ibid., 62–63).

After critiquing these assumptions, Fraser notes that the way ahead in thinking about the public sphere in 'actually existing democracy' is to be conscious of how these assumptions impact on what transpires in public spheres. Writing of a theoretical conception of the public sphere that achieves this, Fraser concludes that 'the theory should expose the limits of the specific form of democracy we enjoy in contemporary capitalist societies', so that 'it can thereby help inspire us to try to push back those limits' (ibid., 77; see also Fraser 1985).

However, whereas Fraser was writing with respect to the USA, the democratic shortcomings of which have not always been well acknowledged amidst 'a great deal of ballyhoo about "the triumph of liberal democracy"' (ibid., 56), for the women's rights activists in this book, the limits of Malaysian democracy have been long apparent and its pretensions to democratic openness have always been evidently pretensions. It is in recognition of this that the first demand on Mak Bedah's shopping list is 'Democracy for all!' Their achievements in pursuit of this with limited resources and under difficult circumstances ought to be, in my opinion, admired.

On Success

I have previously described how WCI regarded its campaign in 2008 as a 'success' (Lee 2011b, 31). This view was based on the extensive media coverage it garnered (Lee et al. 2010, 303) and was also evinced by the

number of invitations that Mak Bedah received to diverse events, including invitations to speak at universities (e.g. Song 2008), and the positive engagement that WCI had with a number of candidates.

However, I am now unsure about the importance of 'success' as an outcome of social movements or campaigns. When I have discussed social movement campaigns such as WCI's, I am sometimes asked to affirm if it was 'successful' and to outline on what grounds I make the affirmation. With respect to my description of JAG in the chapter that follows, a reviewer of the manuscript of this book asked me just to do just these things. The reviewer also asked what was JAG's 'concrete impact at the national level?'

I think such questions are understandable ones. The question of 'success' is important for many people and many organisations; organisations and campaigns with a history of 'success' are more likely to receive support from funders, which in turn enables them to be supported to carry on their work and to achieve further success. This success may in turn be formally assessed through diverse mechanisms and indicators that have proliferated in pursuit of 'measuring success' (e.g. Hailey and Sorgenfrei 2005).

Until now I have not sought to challenge the legitimacy of demands to adjudicate and explicate the successfulness of the campaigns or movements about which I have written. Even until very recently, the request seemed simply too commonsensical for me to even think it could be doubted. But in my own subjective experience of diverse undertakings—both activist and not—'success' has not been a criterion of central importance to me. I also do not think 'success' should in general be a criterion on which to judge the efforts of a movement or campaign, unless the actors therein actively decide to make it one. I realise that this is likely to puzzle many readers.

Discussions of 'success' will usually point to whether the desired outcomes—perhaps even 'concrete impacts'—of a given venture were realised. Luke Yates has noted that 'The success of social movements was historically measured by the extent to which movements were acknowledged by opponents and their demands met by legislation' (2015). However, notions of success as measured against the ostensible aims of a movement have had their limitations brought into question. This is because, as Edwin Amenta et al. note, activists

may fail to achieve their stated program—and thus be deemed a failure—
but still win substantial new advantages for their constituents, a situation
likely for challengers with far-reaching goals. There may be beneficial unin-
tended consequences. Challengers can do worse than fail; they can induce
backlashes, such as repression or increased policing. Challengers' constitu-
encies may gain political results that challengers do not cause. (2010, 290)

They go on to note that in recognition of these limitations, others have
sought to acknowledge that 'a challenger can have considerable impact
even when it fails to achieve its goals and that successful challengers
could have negligible consequences' (ibid.). For them, success is better
considered in the light of the accrual of 'collective goods', which can be
'material' (or concrete) 'such as categorical social spending programs,
but can also be less tangible, such as new ways to refer to a group'
(ibid.).

One day in 2008 while talking to Toni about WCI, she began to tell
me about WCI's campaign in 1999, in which she nearly won the seat of
Selayang. Toni recounted to me her feelings while watching the results of
the ballot counting and being stunned by the fact that it was so close and
that she had a real prospect of winning. I remember her saying to me
that, at one point during the count, she turned to her campaign manager
and exclaimed, 'What if we win?!' What was clear to me in her recollec-
tions was that, irrespective of what others might have thought, her goal
in standing as a candidate was not to *actually* win the seat, but rather
to use the campaign as a platform for articulating the issues affecting
women in Malaysia, for explaining WCI's perspective, and to argue for
WCI's agenda which might be progressed by means other than by dint
of her winning her seat and prosecuting her agenda in Parliament (see
also Lee et al. 2010, 302).

These recollections of Toni's reveal several things to me. First is that
the ostensible goals of a venture or a campaign may in fact not be the
goals being pursued by those behind it. An external observer may well
presume that, in the 1999 elections, Toni was 'in it to win it', whereas
at least for her (if not also everyone else in the campaign team), winning
the seat was not the core objective. The external observer would be for-
given for concluding that WCI's 1999 campaign 'failed'. It is here that a
'collective goods' perspective on success appears to have merit, because
although ostensible objectives were not reached, other positive outcomes

could have been realised, such as awareness raising of women's issues in the political and public sphere.

However, in my opinion, even the more accommodating 'collective goods' perspective of 'success' has shortcomings. The shortcomings lie not only in the fact that ventures such as WCI's—which are often located in the general field of 'development', within which 'women's empowerment' is in turn often located (Malhotra et al. 2002)—have diverse 'intangible objectives' (Khang and Moe 2008, 74). Such objectives are hard to measure 'concretely'. And furthermore, objectives such as 'women's empowerment'—the concept and objective of which has been both critiqued and affirmed (e.g. Wieringa 1994)—is sometimes sought after not as the goal itself but in pursuit of other ends, such as the promotion of growth and better governance, and the reduction of poverty (Malhotra et al. 2002, 3; Francisco 2007, 103).

Empowerment refers to a process, and measuring it requires indicators, which will be proxies for the increased agency of those targeted by the process. However, evaluating this requires measurements at two different points in time, and, as Malhotra, Schuler and Boender point out, 'there is an enormous problem with regard to the availability of adequate data across time' (ibid., 19–20). Here qualitative studies about the subjective experiences of women are important in understanding empowerment. Malhotra, Schuler and Boender write that 'Even indicators such as women's participation in power structures like the political system are still often inadequate in telling us whether empowerment is occurring without a qualitative sense of what the representation is like or what it means' (ibid.). Claudia Derichs has similarly observed with respect to women in politics that 'A stronger female say in the Malaysian government should not automatically be equated with a universal strengthening of women's rights and status in society' (Derichs 2013, 122; see also Skalli 2006, 39).

Furthermore, the process of empowerment is subjective. Drawing on the work of Naila Kabeer (1997, 1998), Malhotra, Schuler and Boender argue that 'women's own interpretation of empowerment' must be considered, and that 'rather than relying on what is valued by the evaluators of programs, the process of empowerment should be judged as having occurred if it is self-assessed and validated by women themselves' (Malhotra et al. 2002, 20).

It is in view of these sentiments that I turn in the following chapter to a description of the highly active women's coalition, JAG, the origins,

ventures, achievements and reflections of which are presented to the reader in directly reported words of women involved in that coalition. Their subjective experience and evaluation of JAG's work since the 1980s are in the foreground of that chapter. However, before proceeding there, I feel I must reflect on the question posed by one reviewer of this book, 'If WCI was successful, why was there no continuity post 1999 and 2008?'

I can understand that anyone who hears or reads an account of WCI's two campaigns would wonder, given the very near win in 1999 and great media splash in 2008, why WCI did not run campaigns in other following elections. The lack of repetition of WCI's efforts might seem to be an acknowledgement that its campaigns were not successful, or were not worth the effort of repeating.

From a practical perspective, it must be recalled that there were no seasoned political campaigners in WCI's first campaign. I recollect Toni telling me that WCI's 1999 campaign was guided by a how-to booklet produced by an international organisation. Those participating in WCI were volunteers who took time out of their other commitments to participate in an effort because of some mix of commitment to the cause and personal ties to the people involved (Lee 2011a, 370–371). In the space of the four years between elections, much can happen to people that can affect their availability for intense campaigns. Much can also happen to people's commitment to a cause, either in the degree of commitment to it as compared to other causes, or how they judge that cause's goals should best be reached. Countless other factors can come into play, including the personal circumstances of protagonists at key moments, and that the constellation of people who become important to a person inevitably will shift, making it hard to decline a request by another worthy acquaintance to assist in their campaign. Perhaps, in the same way as not every storm results in a rainbow, one might say that in the elections after 1999 and 2008, the mix of necessary ingredients to precipitate WCI into being was simply not in the air.[2] And nor should it be the case that WCI must return at every election. Rather than seeing WCI as an entity whose disappearances we regret, we could instead see WCI as one component in a panoply of activism to address diverse gender justice issues.

In *The Fragility of Things*, William E. Connolly describes an array of crises that the world is facing as a result of the global status quo and the impacts of capitalism. He writes that in responding to it, capitalism 'sets

too large and generic a target' and that people should not 'wait for a revolution that overthrows the whole system' (2013, 42). Instead, he refers to the role of 'interim responses' and that

> we must define the urgent *needs* of the day in relation to a set of *interim possibilities* worthy of pursuit on several fronts, even if the political odds are stacked against them. We then test ourselves and those possibilities by trying to enact this or that aspect of them at diverse sites, turning back to reconsider their efficacy and side effects as circumstances shift and results accrue. (ibid.; italics original)

These efforts, he argues, should not only take established forms; 'ossified structures' are 'best pried open with a mix of public contestation of established interpretations, experimental shifts in multiple role performances, micropolitics in churches, universities, unions, the media, corporations, state actions and large-scale cross-state citizen actions'.

What comes through for me in Connolly's suggestion is that, in the pursuit of (let me refer to it simply and generically for the moment as) justice, there is not only space for, but a *need* of a great diversity of approaches, including the experimental, the ephemeral and the modest (see also Harford 2011). Indeed, and as I realised on that cool concrete floor beneath the whirring ceiling fan surrounded by cardboard and simple stationery, modest and accessible interventions have an important place in helping to realise expressions of the *kratos*/power/*kuasa* by the *demos*/people/*rakyat*.

And for me, Connolly draws our attention to a key reason why 'success' can be regarded as relatively unimportant. Just because the 'apparent political odds are stacked against them', therefore making success unlikely, it does not mean that a venture is not *worthwhile*. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted in dark days in 1945, 'we need not have hope to undertake our work' (Sarte 1956; see also Lee 2015, 9–12, 182–187). Therefore, although I could point towards WCI's 'successes' in educating some voters and some MPs with respect to issues facing women, and for the attention it threw on women's issues in the media, I would assert that the worthiness of civil society ventures—even small ones—must be viewed not in terms of their outcomes, but more so in terms of what it was striving to achieve and how thoughtfully it strove to achieve it, even if the odds of success were overwhelmingly small.

In defence of my opinion, I point towards Duncan Green who, in his book *How Change Happens* (2016), describes the importance of having pre-existing networks, organisations and ideas ready, irrespective of the seeming-likelihood of their objectives being realised. To illustrate, Green notes that when the 2013 fire in the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh which killed over 1,100 people occurred (Stillman 2013), an 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh' soon came into effect. This accord, however, happened rapidly because of the substantial work already done in developing policy, networks and trust with key actors (Green 2016, 18–19). Although not a subscriber to Milton Friedman's economic policies, Green cites Friedman who argued that, when a crisis occurs, the actions that will follow will 'depend on the ideas that are lying around', and that what is needed is 'to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the political impossible becomes politically inevitable' (ibid., 17).

In conclusion, I believe that it is here that, in addition to the diverse achievements in raising awareness of the barriers to independent women participating in electoral politics, that a further contribution of WCI can be found. As noted before, WCI sought to be a model for how an election campaign could be run differently and in a way that better accommodated the participation of women. Through the experiences of both younger and older Malaysians in its two campaigns, and in the descriptions of its efforts or ethos—of which this very chapter is a part—WCI has left 'lying around' ideas and stories of how elections and women's involvement can be imagined and done differently, and why doing so is important.

NOTES

1. The candidates that the Mak Bedah met and sought an encounter with were Tony Pua and Edward Lee (Democratic Action Party), Nurul Izzah Anwar and Hee Loy Sian (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, People's Justice Party), Jeyakumar Devaraj and S. Arutchelvan (Parti Sosialis Malaysia, Malaysian Socialist Party, which ran under the banner of Parti Keadilan Rakyat), Siti Maria (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, Malaysian Islamic Party), Samy Vellu (Malaysian Indian Congress), Shahrizat Abdul Jalil (United Malays National Organisation), Carol Chew, Chew Mei Fun and Donald Lim (all from Malaysian Chinese Association).

2. I recognise that a rainbow is an imperfect analogy. This is in part because the circumstances that result in rainbows are infinitely more predictable (Rooney 2016) that those that result in certain social movements from coalescing.

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CHAPTER 4

Voices from the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality

Abstract This chapter focuses on an important women's rights coalition, the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG). This coalition, which has its roots in 1980s feminism and campaigns against violence against women (VAW) in Malaysia, is a successful and cohesive coalition of twelve women's rights organisations throughout Malaysia. It is a key actor in the history of women's rights in Malaysia as well as contemporary women's rights activism. Lee develops an innovative approach to the presentation of the voices of women involved in this coalition. Although the chapter begins with an introduction to the background of the coalition, this chapter is mostly composed of the direct voices of women from JAG. These women, who are key persons in JAG's constituent NGOs, were interviewed individually, but in this chapter their voices are interleaved such that it is as if they were all in the room together narrating their coalition's history and activities. To respect of the directness of these voices, this chapter does not attempt any abstraction or theorisation of the content, and seeks instead to honour the voices, ideas and analyses of the women themselves.

Keywords Joint Action Group for Gender Equality · Women's coalitions · Feminism · Activism · Malaysia

Coalitions can be important contributors to the public sphere and can be effective advancers of their chosen causes. Much research has sought to examine coalitions, how they form and how they function

(see McCammon and Moon 2015). The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), for example, is a research initiative located at the University of Birmingham that seeks insights into civil society activities that are important in the fostering of 'legitimate institutions that promote developmental outcomes, such as sustainable growth, political stability and inclusive social development' (DLP, n.d.). Foremost in its interests are 'home-grown' coalitions, which are highlighted because 'Coalitions (formal and informal) are groups of leaders and organisations that come together to achieve objectives they could not achieve on their own'. Coalitions are 'key political mechanisms', according to the DLP, 'that can resolve collective action problems' (ibid.).

To understand how successful coalitions form and function, the DLP has commissioned research into civil society coalitions in developing nations, including the Philippines (Sidel 2014), Uganda and South Africa (Grebe and Nattrass 2009), and with a focus on women's coalitions, such as those in Jordan and Egypt (Tadros 2011). In 2016, I was invited by my colleague Ceridwen Spark to participate in her DLP-supported research project looking at women's coalitions in the Asia-Pacific. For this project we examined the politically active Malaysian women's coalition, the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (referred to as JAG), which has, as noted earlier, been a major presence in this book even if, until now, it has been in the background.

Our DLP report made use of only a small portion of the material gathered in the interviews we conducted with thirteen representatives from most of JAG's twelve member organisations. Our semi-structured interviews took place in Kuala Lumpur in April 2016, with two in subsequent weeks over the telephone. They revolved around a focussed set of questions related to the origins, achievements, and modus operandi of JAG. We were especially interested in what our interviewees thought was the 'magic ingredient' that enabled JAG to function so well and to endure the difficult and sometimes threatening social and political context in which it operated. A number of our questions related to the annual JAG event, the Aiyoh Wat Lah! Awards, which was a mock awards ceremony where public figures and institutions that have spoken or behaved in misogynist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic ways are 'awarded'/rebuked by the nomination and award-giving process (see Lee 2016). And finally we were also interested in understanding the value that JAG offered to its member organisations—the added value that

made their investment of time and effort worthwhile in pursuit of each organisation's specific missions.

The interviews were fascinating, often inspiring, despite the hardships and grave issues that the coalition has faced and seeks to tackle. The value of this chapter is in enabling us to hear in their own words the recollections of people who have been deeply involved in a significant element of the women's movement in Malaysia today and in the past. Readers interested in broader treatments of the history of the women's movement can consult the chapter by Lai Suat Yan (2003) 'The women's movement in peninsular Malaysia, 1900–99: A historical analysis', Rohana Ariffin's (1999) article 'Feminism in Malaysia: A Historical and Present Perspective of Women's Struggles in Malaysia', or the book *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung Revolution* by Cecilia Ng et al. (2006) (the lattermost of which treats the origins of JAG in a different manner to what I present below).

As is pointed out in the interview material, the coalition started coming into being to address the prevalence of violence against women (VAW) in the 1980s, which was a decade characterised by crackdowns on civil society, exemplified by Operasi Lalang (see Lee 2008). The coalition and its members continue to be tested in diverse ways, but these tests simultaneously strain and forge the bonds that hold the coalition together. These bonds make JAG's work meaningful and important to the member organisations, and has also enabled the coalition to both endure and to chalk up notable contributions to Malaysia's women's movement.

In the telling of the JAG story, there are some founding events, moments, and achievements. Lai describes how, 'Initially, a group of over twenty women in their twenties and thirties, most of them previously student activists, met informally as a study group in the early 1980s' (Lai 2003, 61). The first incarnation of JAG, the Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women, referred to as JAG-VAW, was launched on 1 October 1984 with five NGOs.[1] They then organised 'a historic two-day public event' (Ng and Chee 1996) which was held in March 1985 to coincide with International Women's Day. This event 'highlighted violence against women in five areas: domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment in general and in the workplace in particular, prostitution and the portrayal of women in the media'. Academic and veteran women's right's activist Cecilia Ng has noted that the focus on VAW was deliberate because, 'besides a problem (albeit silent) encountered by Malaysian women, it

was also an issue that could possibly unite women across culture, religion, class and geographic regions' (2010, 96).

An objective of that 1985 meeting, which seems fulfilled in JAG's ongoing work, was to emphasise 'the actual process of working together as a group, as a collective, where the values of cooperation, sharing and group decision-making were experienced' (Ng and Chee 1996). More frequently pointed towards as first achievements, however, are two key legal amendments, although their statuses as 'successes' are not unalloyed. The first relates to an amendment to laws relating to rape which were made in 1989 and which was more the result of efforts by the coalition Citizens Against Rape (CAR), which included both women's and children's organisations. Although not technically a JAG victory, it involved many of the women involved in JAG and came out of the same milieu (see Lai 2003, 62; Ng and Chee 1996). The second achievement was the realisation of a Domestic Violence Act (DVA). As noted by interviewees below, public consciousness about domestic violence was minimal in the 1980s. However, participants in JAG-VAW knew the impacts of it on women and sought to address it. The DVA was the result of a 'ten year campaign' of which the National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO) and CAR were a part, and involved 'a committee consisting of representatives from the Police, Religious Affairs and the Judiciary together with experts and selected women's groups' (Ng and Chee 1996). Progress was slow for a number of reasons including the fact that a significant issue related to the inclusion of Muslim women under the proposed Act (Ng 2010, 100; Dairiam 1995, 106). At last, however, the DVA was enacted in 1994, but only implemented by Parliament later in 1996 after street protests by women activists (Lai 2003, 64).

As 'victories', the above are not without criticism. For example, the amendments relating to rape do not cover rape using an object, whilst the DVA does not recognise marital rape (see Lai 2003; Dairiam 1995, 106; and see especially tan 2007 for a critique of the amendments relating to rape). Compromises are part and parcel of working with government in Malaysia and the impact of Islam and the conflict between civil and *shariah* law (see Lee 2010) is also a significant part of that. Shanthi Dairiam describes this conflict of jurisdiction in the process of creating the DVA, and provides insight into the discussions over the DVA, noting how the solution to the issue of including all women, regardless of religion, 'was to make the bill a subsidiary bill of the current penal code. This would avoid any conflict of jurisdiction as under the

constitution, the penal code is a federal law and therefore completely out of the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts which are controlled by various states in the country' (1995, 106).

Engagement with the state remains an issue for JAG. JAG's successes have transpired 'largely through a process of negotiation with the state' (Ng et al. 2006, 61). This is despite JAG operating in a more contestatory manner as compared to another significant women's coalition, the NCWO, which 'opts to work for reform for women from within the establishment' (Lai 2003, 60). However, reliance on negotiating with the state has had definite drawbacks for JAG. One of these is unreliability. As shown below, many hours of interaction with the Attorney General (AG) and his representatives seem now apparently for naught when the AG was replaced during the upheavals surrounding the 1Malaysia Development Bank scandal that has engulfed the Malaysian government since 2015 (see Gabriel 2018; Ramesh 2016). This scandal, it might be said, is symptomatic of a government that is not adequately exposed to the scrutiny of the will of its populace, a position taken by the coalition 'Bersih' [Clean], which seeks an array of reforms to improve electoral practice in Malaysia, and whose operations happened for some time to be located in Empower, a JAG member organisation. And lastly, negotiating with the state in the way that JAG so often has, does give the state the upper-hand. 'This balance of forces' in favour of the state, writes Lai, 'indicates the need for the women's movement to grow and develop a wider base so that the state will have no choice but to concede to the movement's demands' (2003, 64). This concern about the wider grassroots support that JAG would benefit from is something which comes through in the comments of the women interviewed.

What follows in this chapter is presented in a way that foregrounds the voices of the women with which Spark and I spoke. The manner of its presentation draws inspiration from the documentary films of Errol Morris, who weaves together the narrative in his films with the different and overlapping voices of his interviewees, each of whom are responding to or telling a similar element of the story that Morris is drawing out from them (see, e.g., *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), *Tabloid* (2010) or *The Thin Blue Line* (1988)). The below 'conversation' is compiled from the interviews conducted by myself and Ceridwen Spark.

Nine of the twelve member organisations[2] of JAG participated in the project.[3] The representatives spoken to were (in the chronological order in which the interviews took place): Meera Samanther, President of the

Association of Women Lawyers (AWL), and also on the board of the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO); Lainey Lau (at the time) Program Officer at WAO; Thilaga, associated with Justice for Sisters; tan beng hui, on the board of All Women's Action Society (AWAM); Ivy Josiah, former Executive Director of WAO; Lee Wei San, Senior Program Manager at AWAM; Irene Xavier and Suguna Papachan (interviewed together), associated with Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor (PSWS); Yasmin Masidi, Program Manager at Empower; Syarifatul Adibah Mohamad Jodi and Aliah Ali, Programme Officers at Sisters in Islam (interviewed together); Puan Halida Ali, on the board of Perak Women for Women (PWW); and Loh Cheng Kooi, Executive Director of the Women's Centre for Change (WCC).

ON JAG'S ORIGINS

Julian Lee (JL)	Why did JAG come into being?
Yasmin Masidi (YM)	Violence against women.
tan beng hui (tbh)	The original JAG coalition was the one that was formed in 1985, to organize the very first campaign on violence against women in Malaysia. Prior to that there had been absolutely zero public awareness for anything to do with issues around violence against women.
Loh Cheng Kooi (LCK)	You know twenty years ago when […] when a rape happened, people would say 'Oh, she wasn't dressed properly', etcetera.
Ivy Josiah (IJ)	Once we [WAO] opened the shelter [for women experiencing domestic violence] in 1982 right up until 1985, in the initial years, we very quickly realised that women [who went to the police about domestic violence] were being turned away.
Irene Xavier (IX)	…basically we were complaining that the police w[ere] very uncooperative with the women. Husband would just have to turn up, and the police would listen to him and not us. If the women went alone there was no chance the police was going to listen to her at all. So we had these kind of issues.

IJ   There was no law and policy in place [that was of use to women] and so therefore the need to advocate to have a law around domestic violence brought women's groups together. So when they came together they said let's look at the broad spectrum of all laws that affect women in the area of violence. So that was the reason JAG came together.

tbh   [Those involved] were just people who knew each other through, you know, different links… [and it] culminated in a two-day workshop. So I—they—brought together about 2000 odd people, which was phenomenal for the time. And it was a two-day workshop over a weekend.

YM   [This workshop] was I think the genesis of, you know, the Joint Action Group, who was then known as the 'Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women'.

tbh   So basically we have evolved in the issues that we have taken on […] over time as you know. From VAW, now we do a whole range of things and partly a lot of that has to do with also the entry of Sisters in Islam, since they have brought on a lot of concerns relating to women's rights within marriage. So yah, inheritance laws, divorce, and then now the newest, which is of course transgender women. Sexuality has always been there hovering in the background from the mid [19]90s onwards.

Thilaga (T)   At the very core of it, the issues faced by transgender people is a gender issue. […] Transgender women *are* women […] So, we thought that it is really important that we talk to the gender groups to really mainstream it, and for them to take it on. [And also] trans*men generally face a lot

more—they are a lot more invisible, although they have so many issues in terms of sexual violence and all of those things, they have no space to talk about it sometimes because they are seen as men. So, they [JAG] were very welcoming of people, so I thought that was really cool.

Lee Wei San (LWS)   [JAG has always] worked on violence against women, right. Now it's called 'JAG GE'—so Joint Action Group for Gender Equality. So I guess the big […] joint goal is to create gender equality in Malaysia.

YM   VAW and GE are different[;] those two things are very different things. They're connected, but you can technically have a situation where you might have good laws or remedies for violence against women, without necessarily prioritising gender equality which you know is much larger than that.

IJ   Initially we were very scared. Like 'oh if we were to do advocacy and challenge the police and challenge [authorities]—we're going to get shut down.' And I tell the story over and over again, definitely it will be in my book. It was Irene Xavier. I'm not sure whether it was prior to [19]87 or after 87 [-the year of Operasi Lalang]…

IX   And that time the government was really cracking down hard on activism and that was a period of a lot of fear.

IJ   She [Irene Xavier] said that 'if you start getting scared about the police, if shelter staff are scared about the police, then we are *all* like battered women, except that the perpetrator is the police now.' And […] the penny just dropped for me.

IX   So we made a big campaign against the police and how anti-women they were. How they participated in the violence against

women and so on, and then the police called us out, threatened to arrest us, tried to force us to disclose the names of the women who were treated like this by the police and so on. So all these kind of things happened in that time.

IJ It was for me radical. […] And then because of my leadership in WAO and the leadership of course of my colleagues too, [WAO realised the] need to be more advocacy-driven. We have to be more daring[,] but to be extremely factual about it. Evidence-based advocacy. So that's the WAO story.

tbh Although WAO was one of the organisations behind the inaugural campaign in 1985, and was part of the DV campaign in the early 90s as well, I would say it recognised the importance of going beyond traditional 'women's issues' and came onboard with JAG more fully in the mid-90s […] when Ivy actually took over as the executive director and understood that we needed to quickly catch on to this role of women's rights and human rights reform. And then [she] slowly steered the organisation…. you can see the organisation [WAO] has really shifted. Quite tremendously. From a purely service oriented organisation to [include] advocacy.

IJ I think groups like Women's Aid Organisation, and Sisters [In Islam], because we have direct contact with people who are facing this discrimination, it's real. It's not conceptual. So I think because of that, the direct experience helps us understand we cannot work in silos. The intersectionality, the diversity all of it, [makes working in silos] impossible—you can't just say I want to look at families, you know, and straight women, and that's it. No. You can't say that.

LWS	I mean in the four years that I've been part of JAG, at every year's evaluation and planning [meeting], I notice that the women leaders […] are always saying yes, you know, we're working on women's issues like violence against women, but we need to be connected to the larger national and social movements because, you know, as women we also need to have our voices there. And it's not like 'oh women only work on women's issues'. It's not. That should not be the situation. And so Empower for example is leading the charge on free and fair elections [through Bersih].
YM	[R]esolving violence against women is not the end, it's the beginning. Greater gender equality in Malaysia [means looking] at issues systematically, rather than just identifying who to blame [in a specific instance].
LWS	But anyway […] the big goal is gender equality, but I think we're also very aware of the need to connect to bigger social and national movements.
JL	That was interesting what you just said, Wei San, because one way people *could* see it is that you're trying to draw attention to women's issues. Whereas what you've also said is that it's also going the other way. Where you're trying to *project* women's voices into larger different conversations.
LWS	Yeah, yeah. And I think that's really important because we don't want to be silent, as just women's rights activist only working on women's issues. Of course we understand [as] with all the other stuff that is happening out there […] that there is a layer of how women face oppression and face discrimination on top of the various other layers of issues. And so I think that's why it's

	important for us to have a voice out there, to show also that the women's movement needs to or wants to or has had an impact in different ways.
YM	Outside the women's organisations, [social] movements in Malaysia are still very patriarchal and […] male centric. It was quite, I think, quite fortunate that so far Bersih has [had women leaders] ever since it became a purely civil society […] movement. Because I think that the visibility of both Ambiga and Maria Chin Abdullah actually helped a lot in normalising the idea that yes, women are leaders too, and they're not just there taking care of the household while their husbands are detained [by authorities].
Loh Cheng Kooi (LCK)	The young generation [today] grew up in that situation where everything is—their rights are […]—part of their growing up life. So the need to struggle doesn't come about except for an individual situation. Ok, if you're sexually harassed by your boss you want your rights. You know you want your justice for example yah. But the bigger struggle—it's—it's so so… I mean at the moment, politically-wise, we have I think [to] struggle against corruption, [to have] good governance. So the struggle of the women's group[s] is really right now a broader struggle you know.

ON THE BENEFITS AND IMPORTANCE OF JAG TO THE MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

tbh	I guess for me the importance of JAG is […] the space that it provides for […] solidarity. Because we're spread out into so many organisations […] The spaces in JAG [are] also good to cross ideas and exchange [them, and] get support from like-minded feminists.

LL	We all work with different groups, either in different parts of the country or we have slightly different foci and it's great to have all the different voices there and see how we can improve the rights of women in a more—in a wider way I suppose.
Suguna Papachan (SP)	[If not for JAG, w]e would be working with [people like] ourselves […] I think the link with JAG provides us with ideas.
IX	If not we will only be working with very like-minded people all the time but whose influence is very small. So JAG sort of gives us a broader access to influence.
LCK	The fact that we [WCC] are up north [in Penang, means] we're not in the hot seat of the KL political human rights scene. The fact [is] that our sisters in [Kuala Lumpur] have [a] lot more broader issues. I mean if we are up north we are unusual in the sense that we can spend a lot of time doing [work in the] community. But the JAG sisters in KL are constantly reminding us of so many issues that's happening. We are part of this whole national struggle. So this [aspect of inclusion with national issues] has certain added value in our organisation. [W]e are an organisation in the North, but we definitely are a national organisation. [W]e are also adding value to JAG because we're doing a lot of legal advocacy work, victim advocacy support in the court, training prosecutors, lobbying for the [right] laws.
Puan Halida Ali (PHA)	Particularly [with] issues that we women face in Malaysia, […] we can't stand alone. [With] JAG we have a bigger voice. There are a lot of issues for women […] so that's why we joined JAG, so that there is a bigger voice […] so then the government can maybe hear us.

IX	We [at Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor] are a group that works with people who are not very visible, you know. And our friends—[we] call [them] our friends—are people who get into trouble all the time and get arrested all the time and get into trouble all the time. These are the people that we work with.
T	I guess for us [Justice for Sisters], our relationship with the government folks are probably not that great, and like, for us to have some different entry point, we thought it'd good to, like, you know, build a coalition with a group that already has been established; they already have some entry points…
IX	And being in JAG sort of helps to raise some issues by people who not so labelled as—you know—trouble makers, left, and whatever. So it is a good space for us to be in, a less offensive space. And I think that is beneficial for us.
JL	So you feel your organisation is perceived as too much of 'riffraff', and JAG kind of gives your issues more of a civil appearance?
IX	Yeah.
JL	And in a dialogue with the state, JAG kind of makes the dialogue easier?
IX	Yeah, so in that sense I think it is a good coalition, not everybody wears the same hat, same uniform or something. But different kinds of people can exist in one space.
YM	And of course there were also instances where [member organisations] Empower, or Sisters in Islam were not invited to meetings for various [government] agencies. And someone would float the invitation to JAG and say 'Hey would you like to come for this anyway?' So we'd just gate crash the meetings anyway. [Or in 2005 during discussions around] amendments [to] the penal code and the criminal

procedure code, [someone in JAG said,] 'I've arranged for us to […] go to parliament to meet so and so with these backbenchers', and so on and so on. It felt like just a well-oiled machine, that things kind of just all fell together.

Syarifatul Adibah Mohamad Jodi (SAMJ)   I think—when it comes to [press statements], JAG's voice is louder than other['s]. […] But in terms of security: Ok let's say we want to release a statement. SIS [Sisters in Islam] will draft the statement, but will also ask other JAG members to endorse. So when we publish [it], when we send [it] to the journalists, we send as JAG, rather than just SIS. [Partly] for security reason, also for wider outreach.

Aliah Ali (AA)   Having JAG together, it gives us a sense of security, especially on issues [relating to] transgender [and] freedom of religion. Even though SIS has been […] dealing with this issue since it's inception, but […] having the name Islam itself [in our organisation,…] people have expectations of you and that's why when SIS comes up, talking of freedom of religion, people become very critical and, you know, start condemning. So to have ten other women's rights organisations backing us up, that gives us a sense of security. And we're all sharing our resources, so it's very helpful as well. […] [S]o one issue that we've been trying to work [on] is child marriage and yeah that's something that we just started, but since we have all these other organisations, we can share resources and ask 'What's the best way to approach it?' and 'Who are the best people to get in touch with?'

LL

We [each] lead on things that we think we know better. [But w]e'll contribute as we can [to others]. So we draw on the different strengths of the different groups. Every group has its slightly different focus. So AWAM, you know, they know sexual harassment laws, so when it comes to a sexual harassment project we go: 'Ok AWAM can you take lead of this project.' And then we all [chip in] quite as much as we can. So that's how we tend to work […] WAO would definitely know domestic violence stuff better, migrant workers rights, we care a lot about trafficking issues as well. AWAM, I think they know the issue of rape and sexual harassment better. WCC is really good when it comes to say victim support services and child rights.

LCK

See what happens is, I don't think the other JAG members do as much outreach or service advocacy [as] WCC does. Outreach in a sense that we [engage] about a couple of thousand children and youth every year, basically on sexual violence prevention, and for example we are the only organisation—probably the only NGO in Malaysia not only in JAG—who actually support victims of sexual crime if they go to court. We actually actively support them from the point of investigation all the way throughout the court process, and if you know Malaysia that might take years […]. And because of this work, when we go for the annual JAG 'E and P'—the evaluation and planning meeting—all the JAG people will be sharing the work [they] do. So it is certainly complementary.

Meera Samanther (MS)

Of course most importantly it's the advocacy work that we do for law reform and policy. We feed off each other. [W]e have a JAG WhatsApp group and all eleven organisations, with three or four representatives

	from each, come in and we [discuss] what's happening. 'What's the latest?' Ok there is meeting that the Deputy Minister is going to hold. Ok, who's going to go? Ok, then what are we going to do? Then ok, we're going to have a pre-meeting before the meeting to discuss who says what. What are the areas [we'll broach]? … we know how to strategise, and we know who to call.
LL	So we draw on each other's strengths.
IX	For example, successful sexual harassment cases in this country have always been cases of women from the middle class, […] they are the ones who have won sexual harassment cases against their bosses. [T]here is no way in which a worker, a woman worker, can win a sexual harassment case, under the present law. So I think JAG really has been really crucial in bring up the need for the sexual harassment act. If Sahabat Wanita alone had said this, nobody would pay attention.
MS	Because there are different strengths in each of us [and] we need each other to move forward.

On JAG's Loose Structure and Firm Bonds

tbh	[From the beginning] until at least the late 1990s, JAG was not a formalised structure. It still isn't in the sense that […] it's not registered. [T]he composition was really quite fluid.
MS	It is a very loose coalition. It's not registered. It's just us getting together and calling ourselves JAG. So there is no way anyone can push us around because we are not registered.
tbh	But having said that, of course there were recurring groups throughout the entire time so WAO [for example] was one of them and since AWAM formed in 1988, then AWAM has also been a recurring group. […] But I believe that the early 2000s/late [19]90s,. the people who were active decided that they would cement the structure of JAG in

IJ   a way […] that people will understand that when you say JAG, these are the groups involved. Prior to that JAG was an ad hoc coalition, so it meant that whoever was interested in a particular issue that was being advocated could sign on. Then we started becoming a bit more formalised. WCC Penang, AWAM, WAO… we had more communication. We wanted to monitor the workings of the Domestic Violence Act. 'You are also doing it? How come we are also doing it? Ok let's do it together.' […] So then it started becoming more formal in 2000. [But] I think you cannot underestimate [t]he friendships between all of us. The friendship grew. And as people left to go and form their own organisations the friendships continued […]

LL   [W]e work through friendship […] which is quite unlike how other coalitions work. So they're like, 'How do you guys so work closely?' And we're like, 'I think it's through friendship.' So JAG people are friends even outside of work. And we believe, I guess […] in the same things.

IJ   I now volunteer for other human rights organisations you know, and I can see the difference. You know. Well it can be very clinical. The solidarity is not there because we haven't journeyed together. But we came together and built trust and love and trust and friendships over the passion of women's rights you know. And always around organising something. [T]here's nothing better than everybody coming together to organise something. Like a big event, a walk, charity week [–] we did this big walk to raise awareness on […] for domestic violence. I think when we come together […] it really brings us together because we're organising this big fun fair, we're organising these parliamentary reform meetings, all of that. The content, the actual logistics—this is very challenging given an environment where there is no money, limited resources … it really cements the solidarity. You know all of these challenges, from the logistics to oppression, you know, by the state, I think really cements the solidarity, realising the enemy is out there, not between us. We all get irritated with each other and […] have different ways of working, […] but really it's out there […] where the real challenge is.

tbh	Personal friendships actually make a big difference. And it was what held the movement together.
LL	[Even those who] no longer work with JAG anymore, they're not staff anymore but they're still very passionate about the women's movement in Malaysia. They're still on [the] Google group, we still email each other all the time. It's very personal, for all JAG members, even if you're no longer working at the organisation, you're still part of JAG, and you know you're still able to contribute. So I guess that makes it really powerful—it's personal, there's ownership to it. It's not because you're employed by an organisation.
tbh	So and this is where the deep and long friendships actually make a difference. So when it sounds as though something is not right, people will have no difficulty picking up the phone and answering what's going on.
LWS	The coalition has been to me as a space of learning, a space of yeah, growth. I think that's because the elder women do try to make the effort to connect, and to mentor younger people. That's what I think makes the difference. […] So the more seasoned activist would have different social things and […] even if they didn't know me directly, beng hui [might say to me for example] 'Come and meet Shanti.' … And I think those kind of social spaces maybe made more seasoned activists [seem] more approachable and less scary. So there is a kind of sharing of networks and resources and […] I think it's a massive thing. […] I think that's an amazing kind of sense of trust within the coalition, and I guess it's a sense of generosity. It's not just generosity in and of itself but like, we all have the same goal and let's see how we can best support each other to get there. So there is that kind of sense of solidarity, generosity.
LCK	None of us are mad about power grabbing. [W]hen we do the work it is for the women in this country. I'm very proud that my activist sisters, we all share the same vision.
Ceridwen Spark (CS)	What is the goal?
tbh	Well, just to make sure that women don't have shitty lives you know. Simple as that.

On JAG's Challenges, Including Working with the State

IJ	We are not very grassroots movement, although we keep talking about it all the time, how we need to have a grass roots organisation behind us.
MS	We are not grassroots level enough. Do we really represent the women's voices just because there are [twelve] organisations there [in JAG]?
IJ	If tomorrow we wanted to have a protest it would be hard for us to bring in a thousand women.
IJ	I think there is the aim right now [that] what we want is a grassroots movement.
MS	Why are we not going back to grassroots rather than [doing] very middle class centric […] work?
IJ	…we're very very good about analysis of law and policy and providing very good expert knowledge around this.
MS	Yeah, and it's also language; we are so English speaking.
SP	Most grassroots people speak Malay and their mother tongue. So if more women were in the group [JAG] who speak that, then there would be more interaction with the grassroots to understand issues.
MS	[I]f you ask me to go to the rural [area] and speak in [Malay] I will not be able to […]. I may have the substance but I don't have the language. I can't, I can't do it.
LL	[T]o be fluent in say Malay or Chinese or Tamal is not something you can do overnight. […] I guess English is a good working language and Malaysian government people understand English too. [B]ut we don't want to appear as if, you know, we just a bunch of westerners. Which is tricky. So as much as we can, you know, […] when it comes to police, social welfare or some government documents, I try and translate them into Malay. It takes a lot of time and effort […]. Yeah it's unfortunate but, Malaysia is so multicultural and multilingual it makes it very challenging.

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LL   So a group of JAG people were very dedicated there and formed a committee for the attorney general to talk about law reform—the sort of law reform that we want to see.

tbh   The attorney general's chambers were working with JAG to review quite a number of laws relating to women.

LL   [However] he's got other stakeholders who are pushing for other view, and so it usually was a compromise like, 'Okay, I'm willing to take this but not that.' Or [we'll say] 'I will take this proposal and I will change it a bit.' So from that committee there were a lot of agreements in terms of proposed bills that had some of our input.

MS   We worked for about a year or more. We had meetings every few weeks with the attorney general's chambers on amending the Domestic Violence Act…

LL   And then what happened was, last year you might have heard about the 1MDB thing? Yah, and then the sudden early retirement of the AG.

tbh   … when the AG got sacked that entire project got canned.

MS   … and all that year's work came to naught, when there was a change in the AG.

LL   And so yeah—you know when the AG had stepped down the working committee disappeared too.

tbh   […] the ministry just wasted countless hours of our time.

MS   I don't know what happened to all that work that we did. It's very frustrating. Sometimes I put my foot down and say 'I don't want to work; I don't want to work; I don't want to work.' But then sometimes there is a light somewhere. And maybe [the female parliamentarian in the MCA] Chew Mei Fun renewed my interest to work because she's respectful of our work, you know. It really depends on who we work with…

JL   So maybe you see amongst the whole structure of government, there are opportunities for engagement?

MS   Yeah yeah, definitely. If I take a step back and critique it, I will never be able to do any work. […] And there is new energy coming into the group, the younger activists who push you and say 'No don't [quit], we must do this because….'

tbh   Individual members of JAG also change over time. The older ones leave, so institutional memory isn't so strong that people

understand the importance of selective engagement or critical engagement with the state.

MS   … 'Ah,' [I say to the younger activists,]'but I've been there, done that.' And then they will [say] 'No, we have to, we have to.' Grudgingly sometimes I do it.

On the Aiyo Wat Lah! Awards

AA   Why does it exist? Because there have been so many statements by […] public officials that are like really insensitive, sexist, hom-ophobic, trans-phobic, and they seem to not be reprimanded. So JAG decided that rather than releasing statement after state-ment—it gets tiring—let's just 'award' them.

LWS   The parliamentarians, sometimes, some of them say really stupid things and you know we can't respond to everything because a lot of stupid things come out. […] We need to do something that will hold them accountable, but we can't write a letter for every single horrible thing that they say because it's just too many … I can't even say many. It's much, right? 'Cause you can't count it.

JL   How did the idea behind the Aiyo Wat Lah! Awards begin?

tbh   Yeah, we were sitting in a meeting lamenting about something. I think it was sexuality in Malaysia being attacked by the govern-ment and also across non-state actors and you know cause it was a period in time when it was being attacked every day and you opened the papers and all you would read was rubbish about how terrible LGBTs were. So we said, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could just take over the news and say what we think about people who are con-stantly spewing out rubbish about women?' Then we expanded it and said not just women but homosexuals and transgender people as well. So then came the idea of doing some kind of an award event.

AA   So it's kind of a mock award to hold them accountable and also use it as a way to teach people why these are statements sexist. Why they shouldn't be saying this.

tbh   We have people who are in public office, people who are pub-lic figures who say really ridiculous things to do with women and the LGBT community and they should be called out. Number one because we have elected them into their positions or they are appointed and therefore they are using taxpayers' money to do their jobs. So in their capacity as part of the government

we expect them to hold higher standards where issues of sexism, homophobia etc. are concerned. So that was really the reason why we had it. [However,] it's been easy for people to get confused and think that we are out to penalise certain individuals because very often we do use what individuals say to make a case. But we have actually been quite careful to say that, no actually it's the issue that they talk about that we are highlighting.

IJ   Aiyo Wat Lah! came out because we were running out of ideas on how to make things work. We were tired of coming up with press statement upon press statement.

LWS   …because you know we're so tired of being angry feminists. Being angry can be exhausting.

IJ   So yah, why did Aiyo Wat Lah! [come about]? Because we wanted to have another way of advocating—[something] more creative.

YM   There is no other response that is possible, you know, in this country, any more except to get angry or laugh. You know, Aiyo Wat Lah! is definitely a […] fist raised to the state. But it's laughter, and not like [an] actual fist. And the thing is the state hates being laughed at. You know […] they don't care if you get angry at them, but they care very much if you laugh and make fun of them. […] They can't stand people mocking them. We really desperately need people who will actually stand up to the state and laugh in their faces. And I think Aiyo Wat Lah! is one for that.

MS   [So] we had seven categories, including 'Foot in Mouth', or 'Insulting intelligence', or 'Least Helpful to the Sisterhood.' And then 'Right on track' [for people who said or did commendable things].[4] We had seven different [such] categories. There were all these statements put into all these categories, and then we shortened the list to five statements to a category. And then we put it out for public voting.

AA   How do you explain what 'Aiyo' means? I guess it's whenever something bad happens like you go out and you have flat tire—Aiiiyooo. Often when you say 'Aiyo' it's accompanied with—what do you call that when you slap your head, hand on you forehead?

JL   Face palm?

AA   Face palm, yeah. Complete with a face palm. […] Yeah it's hard to explain.

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SAMJ   Last year [2015], that was the first year they went out from the Klang Valley.[5] They went to Ipoh.

PHA   The Aiyo Wat Lah! committee had said 'Why not try to do it outside of KL and expose the scenario to other people, people outside KL?' So they said can we host it [in Ipoh]? I said 'Why not?' And I immediately said 'You are most welcome and we can host it and invite all our [friends] here to experience this and to know that is going on.' So, its creating awareness for people in Ipoh.

JL   So how was it received? Did people respond well to it?

PHA   Oh yes. We had a very good audience. According to the committee ours was the largest audience. They had done it three times in KL and ours was the fourth.

AA   Last year [2015] during the award show, it was the biggest audience and also we were kind of trending on Twitter on that day, in Malaysia. So that's pretty cool.

PHA   [Aiyo Wat Lah!] is a very good move, to expose the younger generation [to these issues].

AA   Now we want to include students [in organising the Aiyo Wat Lah! Awards].

SAMJ   Meera had an idea. Rather than just JAG organisations [organising it], why don't this time [2016] we involve the students. Meera has the new initiative using AWL—Association of Women's Lawyers—to get the law schools, especially in the private universities, involved in Aiyo Wat Lah! Plus it is also to teach them to think critically, because they are students, right.

LWS   I think the rationale was to ensure that we bring newer people into the movement. This is a way for us to bring young people into the movement by, you know, including them in the project that they can hopefully can feel excited about. So I guess part of the objective is to make sure that through this project we can bring more young people into the fold—into the movement.

AA   We involve them in the process of choosing the nominee, categorising the nominees, and also we have a workshop with the students where we actually teach them about what exactly constitutes the four things that we talked about in Aiyo Wat Lah!: misogyny, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. What does it actually mean? Because you hear these words being thrown around, but what does it actually mean? And how do you know if a statement is sexist?

LWS   We see it as, like, kind of passing on expertise, to build the capacity of the lecturers and the students.

MS   We have a core team. So they have a lecturer from each university coming in, and then I said I insist on two student representatives coming in. I feel that it gives them the space to [speak] and have ownership. And that's where I think… that's where leadership building of leaders for the future comes in. And I can already recognise leaders from the group already. Some of them who come, I can foresee them in the women's movement or part of the women's movement. So I think it's a good training ground when they are in uni life, to be able to recognise what are homophobic, transphobic and sexist statements, and also to be critical.

On the Future of JAG

SAMJ   Yeah the younger generation. I think it is good that more and more young people [are involved]. I mean, I see JAG as a university. Especially the individual [member] organisations. You should treat the individual organisation as a university where you come in with a blank mind and then when you go out you have something in your head.

AA   Yeah, that's a very good analogy. Because it's really what's happening right now. Because, this year when planning for [the Aiyo Wat Lah! Awards], you can see more work being passed on to me [as a younger woman] and all the newer officers. We've never done this before and they're like, 'No it's ok. It's part of the handover process to the second generation.'

SAMJ   The older generation should not be on board forever.

JL   Do you look into the future with hope for JAG?

tbh   Always with hope.

AA   Oh yeah, absolutely, I feel very hopeful. Yeah there are a lot of eager young people who are all for gender equality so yeah.

CS   And what would it mean for you if JAG no longer existed?

MS   I can't see that happening. I can't see that happening.

IJ   I think I would be upset. I'd be sad, yeah. Because I wouldn't want it not to exist. It could be another […] name, but I would want a coalition of women's groups there all the time you know.

tbh   I'm invested in JAG because it's about building a women's movement but I'm not invested in JAG as a structure. So JAG could disappear tomorrow and I don't really mind, because to me that just means that it's time for something else to come up. And what's more important, I think to me, is like the relationships that it creates right now, so that when JAG actually dissolves for any reason, the people can pick up from different points, from whatever they are more interested in.

LCK   I was engaging with a group of university students and, you know, [they] were just telling me 'Oh I hate feminism because feminism means radical feminism. You know, you are extreme.' And things like that, and that's really sad for me. […] [The] lack of consciousness is clearly an issue with the young people. I mean they're committed to the work, they're committed to help abused women and children. They're committed to go out and do outreach to train kids to know that sexual violence is wrong. [But] their work is very much related to the whole patriarchal system…

IJ   Because the work is not over yet for women, women's rights, anywhere in the world. We are a powerful constituency we make up half of Malaysia. You know, for us not to have any kind of a coalition, especially a feminist coalition, would be for me quite tragic, yeah.

PHA   Yeah, if JAG does not exist I think that we will struggle because [of] the way the country is going, and [it] is very difficult if you're alone yeah. […] I do not like what is going on.

IJ   So there has to be formal coalition that continues to do joint actions, joint platforms. Because even the civil and political rights movement will forget the gender part of it—it will forget.

Conclusion

I recall a memory of attending an civil society event in Malaysia with the Toni Kasim. This event, like many others like it, was to begin with four or five speakers who outlined the issue for the audience and called for action. However, as the event was about to begin, an organiser who had seen Toni in the audience approached her and asked if she would also speak. They had just realised that none of the speakers they had organised were women, and Toni's last-minute addition would correct this. I recall Toni accepting the invitation, but then telling me about her mixed feelings. She resented the fact that women always seemed to be tacked on as an afterthought. Despite on the one hand wanting to decline the invitation on those grounds, she decided that on balance she would accept it so that the women's perspective would be heard.

This happened over ten years before Ivy Josiah made the comment above, that 'the civil and political rights movement will forget the gender part of it'. What is clear is that there remains now and for the foreseeable future a very clear need for the work undertaken by JAG, by its component organisations, and by like-minded activists—women and men alike—in raising into consciousness, providing analyses of, and formulating and undertaking campaigns around the great breadth of issues which intersect in diverse ways with the needs and rights of women, as well as other groups of people marginalised on the basis of their gender or sexuality. What is at stake is an inclusive and just 'version of Malaysia'.

Notes

1. Women's Aid Organisation, Association of Women Lawyers, University Women's Association (UWA), the MTUC Women's Section, and the Selangor and Federal Territory Consumers' Association. See Lai (2003, 61).
2. In the interview material in this chapter, reference is sometimes made to eleven member organisations. This is because in the same month as our interviews took place, a twelfth organisation joined JAG, namely Justice for Sisters, which works on transgender issues in Malaysia.
3. The three organisations which were invited to participate but with which interviews were unable to be arranged were Sarawak Women for Women Society, Sabah Women's Action-Resource Group and Tenaganita.
4. The other three categories are 'Policy Fail', 'Cannot Ignore' and 'Enough Already'.
5. The Klang Valley is the region that encompasses Kuala Lumpur.

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CHAPTER 5

Supporting Feminism as a Man: By Way of a Conclusion

Abstract Lee reflects in this chapter on his place as a man in the women's rights efforts he has been a part of in Malaysia in order to consider more generally the place of men in supporting feminism. Lee explores how some men, including Prime Ministers, have sometimes made unhelpful and even harmful interventions for women, and draws on writings of feminist women and men to propose a way of conceiving of men's positive support for feminism.

Keywords Feminism · Men in feminism · Patriarchy
Pro-feminist men

As I described in Chapter 3, it was my friendship with Zaitun 'Toni' Kasim that led me to participate in the Women's Candidacy Initiative's (WCI) 2008 campaign to advocate for more independent women in parliament. It was in any case an objective that was—and still is—hard for anyone to argue against, given the under-representation of women in Malaysia's parliament, as well as the considerable systemic gender injustices—both legal and social—which I learned about through the Malaysian activists whose company I had been keeping (e.g. Schäfer and Lee 2013; Lee 2010, 62–109). For me at the time, in the lead up to the 2008 elections, the fact was that I was going to participate in some way in the elections and then, upon being asked by Toni and having the background of WCI explained

to me, I was excited to climb on-board and assist in whatever way that was thought to be helpful.

As the campaign evolved, so did my role in it. Whereas I had prepared myself to be doing fairly standard electoral campaign work like dropping flyers, raising banners and buntings, driving the candidate hither and yon, my role became more theatrical. I took on the persona of 'a supporter' of Mak Bedah, the fictional character around which WCI's voter education campaign revolved. Whereas all the women involved would play Mak Bedah at any given moment, men would be 'supporters' who understood Mak Bedah's motivations and wanted to throw their weight behind her efforts and to show that men too supported her views.

As a result of my experiences with WCI and the other gender and sexuality based activism I became involved in (e.g. Lee 2012), I came to appreciate deeply why anti-feminist views were so wrong-headed. And by 'anti-feminist', I do not just mean those voices that claim that women have nothing to complain about or, indeed, that women are now enjoying more privileges than men. I also refer to views such as that of one male participant at an inter-faith forum I attended in 2004, who said that he did not support women's rights. Instead, he said that he supported the rights of all humans, irrespective of gender. Although I can see how someone might well-meaningly form such a view, it should not require a great deal of study to become convinced that the gender based injustices faced by women require specific and focused attention and redress. Anyone with doubts can observe that in 2017 only 10% of countries had a female head of government, and that for many of these this is their first ever female head of government (Geiger and Kent 2017). And in terms of the gender pay gap between men and women, things got worse between 2016 and 2017; the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (WEF 2017) found that, based on trends measured in 2016, it would take 84 years for the gap to be closed. However a year later, trends suggest it would take 100 years.

At the time of writing, there are daily articles reporting on the alleged sexual assault, sexual misconduct and sexual impropriety of an array of high profile men in the film industry, of which the now disgraced director Harvey Weinstein is probably the most reported on. However, as the British author Will Self has observed, in addition to those in the film industry, 'women from every walk of life have come forward to say that yes, they too have experienced what amounts to institutional misogyny and abuse, so widespread has such behaviour been in their working

environment'. But, he observes, 'what struck me most forcibly during the entire miserable affair was that the vast majority of public statements condemning sexual violence against women, have come from women themselves'. He then goes on to ask

> Why is it, I wonder, that so few men feel able to speak out against harassment, assault, and downright rape? Do we not have mothers, partners, sisters, nieces and daughters of our own? Are we not viscerally disgusted by the very idea of such behaviour? (Self 2017)

In this concluding chapter, I wish to reflect briefly on these questions and (as I noted in this book's Introduction) to respond to a reviewer of an earlier draft of this book who wrote: 'What would also be instructive is for the author to express why he, as a man, supports the feminist cause, and why men can benefit by joining the movement'. I am of course aware that there is a significant amount of literature on men's role in feminism and my intention is very far from surveying or critiquing it, something which has already been undertaken in texts dedicated to that specific task (e.g. Hagan 1992; Jensen 2017). And I am also conscious of, and not wholly at peace with, the fact that I am ending a book about feminist activism with a discussion that could be seen as 'about men', as if androcentrism was not already the source of so much woe. However, Self's questions and the suggestion by the reviewer do indicate that, on balance and despite my misgivings, there might be value in sharing with readers my reflections, and where my thinking about these questions has led me, in case it of use to anyone who wants a way to think about men's gainful role in feminism. What I will seek to do in this chapter is work through some of the literature that has assisted my thinking and ultimately to offer an image which, I think, may be useful in understanding the ways in which men can usefully make contributions towards feminist efforts.

It is certainly the case that the attempts by some men to engage with the issues faced by women have been problematic. In addition to critiques of the North American 'men's movement' which, although ostensibly sympathetic to feminism, did not clearly welcome women at their events (e.g. hooks 1992), other men have unhelpfully sought to represent women in official capacities. In 2015, there was outcry in Australia when a male student was elected into the role of women's officer in his student union. Bowing to pressure, the student resigned from the post,

but did not concede that there was anything amiss with him representing women at his university. He instead lamented in his resignation letter when he wrote, 'How can we expect our men to stand up for women if they are mocked and insulted for trying to help the cause' (ABC 2015).

However, while this student's chagrin could possibly be put down to well-intended, youthful, but misguided ideas, it has always utterly beggared my belief that the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Tun Razak, could appoint himself in 2012 as the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development. In a press statement, the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) seems to have felt the same way, and described itself as being 'dismayed' by this. The press statement averred that it 'undermines the government's purported commitment towards ensuring that women occupy 30% of decision-making positions', and that 'It makes a mockery of all the time, effort and resources that have been poured into making this a reality' (JAG 2012). 'Does this move mean', JAG continues by asking, 'that after 55 years of being in power, there is really no one else within the Barisan Nasional component parties who is capable of taking over the women's portfolio? If so, what does this mean for Malaysian women when women's leadership within the ruling government cannot be entrusted to take charge of our concerns?' Alas, however, the Malaysian Prime Minister was not to last to make such a self-appointment. Similar dismay was felt in Australia just a year later when the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott appointed himself as women's minister (Jones 2013).

The protestations against these self-appointments should, we must be clear, not be seen as protests against men's involvement in efforts to support gender justice. The issue, if it needs to be spelled out, lies in the fact that to have men holding such positions is to have women's voices and women's agency appropriated by men. Furthermore, given the dearth of women in leadership positions in both Malaysia and Australia, it reduces the opportunity for women to lead and to be seen to lead, and in so doing providing a role model and inspiration for other women and for girls. If a woman cannot hold even the position of women's minister, then there would indeed seem to be little hope for the leadership aspirations of women in general. This is of course thoroughly outrageous.

But these actions are also destructive because the protests against these appointments could be misunderstood by some men, including potentially sympathetic ones, as reflecting a general rejection by women of all men's engagement with and support for feminism. As Jonathon

Crowe had earlier observed, 'The myth that feminism is against men encourages them to shirk [their responsibilities], by making it seem there is nothing constructive they can do to support the feminist project' (2011, 50). And as bell hooks has affirmed, 'Unfortunately, as long as individuals both within and outside feminist movement consider it to be a movement for women only or even one that primarily benefits females, men will be allowed to believe that feminist struggle is not for or about them. And it is. It has to be, or patriarchy and male domination will never be eradicated (hooks 1992, 113).

One route to address the fact that so few men expressly support feminism (whilst there are many who are expressly against feminism (Crowe 2011, 49)) is to attempt to highlight the benefits that men would gain from a world in which there is more gender justice. Toby Miller has portrayed this angle, advanced by some men, as in essence saying that 'We thank feminism for the challenge it has laid down and all that it has done, and can continue to do, for us' (Miller 1988, 117). What this rendering makes clear is that viewing feminism this way—as entailing benefits to men—merely makes it, once again, about men, and 'construct[s] women as a means to the fulfilment of male desires' (Crowe 2011, 51).

While I can understand that some people might cite 'strategic reasons' for highlighting to men the advantages to them of a more gender just world, it does feed that insidious vice: an excessive sense of entitlement. And it is surely when too many men regard their entitlements with respect to women as not being met that they act with anger and violence against women (e.g. Silverman and Williamson 1997; Adams et al. 1995). Whether explicitly through the sexist and misogynist speech and action, or implicitly in the culture through unspoken or taken-for-granted understandings of the way the world is understood to be, men have written into them an invisible constitution that is authored throughout their lives in a thousand different ways and which leads them to have an inflated sense of predominance and centrality in their world. Glimpses of this constitution are sometimes visible when we think twice about what we see around us. Why is it, for example, that sporting leagues are by default men's sporting leagues, whereas women's sporting leagues are declaratively *women's* sporting leagues?

When one becomes attuned to it, one sees everywhere that maleness is the default. When speaking to children about an animal, we almost always refer to it as a 'he', unless the animal is displaying some overtly female characteristic, such as when a kangaroo carries a joey in its pouch. And

even teddy bears are nigh-universally male, even though the anatomical dimorphism between male and female bears—whether toy or real—is at best minimal (e.g. Lapidos 2008). The relationship between gender, toys and inequality was articulated in 2014 by my colleague Kaye Quek in the wake of 'the toy wars' in Australia—when there was a debate about the contribution of gender-based toys towards domestic violence. Whereas a number of conservative politicians predictably criticised this view as 'political correctness', Quek argued that such toys form a culture in which

> women are constructed as unequal to men. [And i]nsofar as toy guns and soldiers communicate to children that aggression and violence are the natural domain of boys, and Barbies and pink tea sets [convey] that beauty and domesticity are the most appropriate realm for girls, they serve to uphold cultural conditions which facilitate the lesser treatment of women, enacted through behaviour such as domestic violence. (Quek 2014)

The hiddenness, or implicitness, or perhaps better the cultural 'defaultness' of maleness, has been linked with Roland Barthes' concept of ex-nomination (which Barthes used with respect to the bourgeoisie in France, post the 1789 French Revolution). David Buchbinder notes how, for Barthes, the visibility of the bourgeoisie disappeared because the French identity per se came characterised as bourgeois. In turn it became 'so normalized that it disappears. We no longer notice it' (Buchbinder 2013, 106). This, Buchbinder says, is parallel to

> the way that the patriarchal order has succeeded in establishing the masculine as the gender norm, and hence as able to dominate the gender system and, through this, the social order itself. For as long as patriarchy remained tacit as a key principle of experiencing gender difference and hence a dominant discourse in the organization of society, it was difficult to contest its power. (2013, 107; see also Holmgren and Hearn 2009, 404)

Against this ex-nomination (or un-naming) of the default masculinity of culture, Buchbinder suggests that feminism and the popularisation of the concept of 'patriarchy' has enabled a process of renomination (or re-naming). Renomination 'provides a strategy by which to render patriarchy visible and', writes Buchbinder, 'vulnerable not only to criticism, but also to change' (2013, 110).

Those interested in making gender injustices more visible can engage in renomination in diverse ways. Examples might be by highlighting the systemic impediments to women's participation in elections, as WCI has done in Malaysia, or revealing in creative ways the overwhelming dominance of men in global leadership position (see Lindig 2015), or even everyday acts such as consciously not automatically referring to animals or teddy bears as 'he', except when you are sure it is male (cf. Holmes and Sigley 2001). In Melbourne, Australia, some lights at pedestrian crossings were refitted to display green and red women, as opposed to the usual green and red men who indicate when to cross the road and when not to. Defending the trial, the Victorian Minister for Women, Fiona Richardson, said that 'A culture of sexism is made up of very small issues, like how the default pedestrian crossings use a male figure—and large issues such as the rate of family violence facing women' (in Gray 2017).

As one might imagine, this trial drew predictable criticisms of the 'political correctness gone mad' genre. And indeed, resistance to feminism and the notion of systemic male advantage is commonplace. However, Robert K. Pleasants (2011) has argued that resistance can be seen as a form of active engagement, which is preferable to non-engagement. Of course, resistance can take diverse forms, many of which are hard to see as being in any way positive. However, Pleasants' view emerges from research he conducted with male students who had taken women's studies courses at colleges in the US, and these young men are likely to be predisposed towards thoughtful and constructive, even if initially resistant, engagement. Pleasants describes the array of ways in which male students resisted the idea that society advantages them as males and disadvantages women. In responding to this resistance, Pleasants recommends teaching feminism in a way that 'encourages men to become more *consciously, personally,* and *actively* invested in feminism' (ibid., 246; italics original). By doing so, he has observed students 'moving from unconscious to conscious resistance as they learned and came to adopt feminism as something personal and important to them' (ibid., 246). This can then lead them to becoming active in support of feminism by 'helping them see their role in supporting or working against gendered inequality, specifically by offering practical examples of how they can make change as individuals, in their relationships with others, collectively in their communities, and more broadly, in society' (ibid., 247).

Crowe similarly argues that men need to realise that they can make practical contributions towards feminist objectives (2011, 52). Amongst

such practical contributions that men can do make are, suggests Crowe, 'assuming greater responsibility for domestic labour, supporting and respecting women's social and sexual choices, challenging sexist social conventions, speaking up for feminist issues in the workplace and supporting feminist political causes'. Such actions enable 'men to take responsibility for feminist issues, without seeking to dismiss or appropriate the feminist project' (ibid.). It was the latter error that was committed by Prime Ministers Najib and Abbott when they assumed responsibility for women's affairs in their governments.

However, it is not only men who must be wary of representing the interests of women. As numerous authors have noted, the category of woman is not monolithic; '"women" is not a category that can be juxtaposed against "men" or', writes Claudia Derichs, 'be treated as a homogenous entity' (2013, 125). Although the above-mentioned coverage of the outcry against institutional sexism in Hollywood has been global, Heather Barr of Human Rights Watch observes that it has 'focused on elites workplaces and elite victims'. Instead, she argues, the response to the injustices faced by women

> needs to be global, addressing the racial and economic divides that can deprive the movement of unity. Drawing connections and mutual support between a Rohingya rape survivor in Bangladesh and a groped intern in the UK parliament, an out-of-school girl in Tanzania and a woman denied access to abortion in Nicaragua will never be easy. Nevertheless, so many of our problems are faced in common. (2017)

The simultaneous diversity and commonality of issues experienced by women around the world, as well as within countries, poses significant challenges for conceiving both the nature of the problem and, concomitantly, what can be done to address it. However, it is also in this difficulty that there might be a useful way of visualising 'the problem'. As I shall soon describe, there is in the work of Val Plumwood an image that might enable men to more readily find a place in supporting feminist efforts.

That image rests, however, on realising that 'oppression is often interwoven. Interwoven or dual oppressive conditions result when oppression is coupled with other oppressions such as sexism, heterosexism, racism, or ethnocentrism' (Stephens et al. 2010a, 380). Thus, not only must pro-feminist men be mindful of the fact that their insights into the experiences of women will necessarily be limited (Flood 1997;

Crowe 2011, 51), but some women have acknowledged they retain certain privileges above other women—such as being white or middle-class. By this logic they argue they ought to be respectful of these other women's experiences and lifeworlds, which may be riven intersectionally with other undervalued social categories, including class, religion, (dis)ability, nationality, and so on (e.g. Mikocki-Bleeker 2016). And although this book has not dwelt on it, transgender people require and are receiving increased inclusion in feminist efforts to which they also make significant practical and theoretical contributions, including by revealing the contours of oppressive ideologies (e.g. Stryker 2007). The perspectives of transgender persons are something that JAG has been increasingly including in the ambit of its work (Lee and tan 2017), culminating in 2016 in the inclusion of Justice for Sisters as a member of the JAG coalition.

Appreciating the complexity of oppression is certainly more challenging than focusing on the egregious and appalling behaviour of individual men. As Self observes, 'So long as we concentrate on the thought crimes of male misogynists we'll render ourselves impotent when it comes to stopping both their assaults and the social injustices which facilitate them' (2017). In making the diverse interconnections of oppressions clearer, I have found Plumwood's 'Ecosocial Feminism as a General Theory of Oppression' clarifying. In this text, she draws on Karen Warren's assertion that a 'transformative feminism' would make 'explicit the interconnections between all systems of oppression' (Plumwood 2008, 227). The example of how this can be done that Plumwood offers is the sealing industry in Australia in the late-1700s, which was populated with British convicts, who in turn exterminated not only seals and southern right whales as they entered bays to give birth, but also Tasmanian Aborigines, whose women were abducted, enslaved, and subjected to cruelty and rape (ibid., 228–229). For Plumwood, 'The history of the convicts, of the Aborigines who suffered invasion, and of the seals and whales whose deaths fuelled these processes of human oppression is interwoven at both ideological and material levels' (2002, 386). Materially, 'The convict system helped maintain the savagely repressive internal order of the class and property structure of Britain, the product of a long-term previous accumulation process. The slaughter of seals and whales provided fuel, oil, and a commercial basis for the convict transportation industry' (Plumwood 2002, 386). Ideologically, there was an understanding of 'nature' that construed it as 'barbaric, alien, and animal

and also as passive and female' (Plumwood 2008, 229; see also Ortner 1974; Lee et al. 2018, Chapter 5).

The challenges posed to feminism by complex and interwoven oppressions are, according to Plumwood, potentially dual. On the one hand, an expansive understanding of the feminist project would overlook the important specificities of women's diverse movements and experiences, and risks unhelpfully subsuming women's issues within other issues that are ostensibly larger and more fundamental. On the other hand, a narrow view of feminism is also problematic; 'since most women are oppressed in multiple ways, as particular kinds of women, women's struggle is inevitably interlinked with other struggles' (2008, 230).

To overcome the dilemma posed by the commonalities and specificities of oppressions, Plumwood proposes that we see specific oppressions as part of a web. 'In a web there are both one and many, both distinct foci and strands with room for some independent movement of the parts, but a unified mode of operation, forming a single system', and that it has 'distinct parts which can and must by focused upon separately as well as together' (ibid., 231). And to underscore the profound importance of tackling this web, Plumwood points out that it is a web that 'now encircles the whole globe and begins to stretch out to the stars, and whose strands grow ever tighter and more inimical to life as more and more of the world becomes integrated into the system of the global market and subject to the influence of its global culture' (ibid.).

Conceiving of oppression systemically and as part of a web with diverse connected threads could threaten to make the task of responding to it paralysingly complex and formidable. However, it also has the potential to address some hurdles that may face a man who wishes to support feminist causes, including uncertainty as to whether his contributions or presence would be welcomed. Furthermore, if a man wishes to support feminism but finds that he does not move in circles where he can directly offer his support to explicitly feminist causes, it is likely that there will be other causes that he can more readily participate in and in which he can promote feminist perspectives and values as well as a gender sensitive approach in that cause's operations (Stephens et al. 2010b, 557–558). And of course, if a man has the opportunity to participate in more overtly feminist efforts (without of course appropriating or dominating them), all the better, for not only will he better appreciate the need for feminism and the grounded and contextualised perspectives of the women with which he works, but those experiences may also inform

other endeavours that are less explicitly feminist, but which nevertheless address some part of the web of oppression.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Reading Plumwood's description of the rape of resources and indigenous women in eighteenth century Australia reminded me sadly of a parallel tragedy in Malaysia in the twenty-first century. Since the 1990s, it has been known that girls and women from the Penan indigenous group were vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Penan Support Group et al. 2009). However, the issue gained considerable public attention in 2008 as reports escalated of girls and women being sexually abused by drivers of trucks carrying timber from remote Malaysian forests. A coordinated civil society fact-finding mission that examined the issue found that the vulnerability of the Penan to this abuse was embedded within a wider context of not only their remoteness and therefore their reliance on timber companies for transportation and other services, but was also connected to their distrust of authorities as well as prejudices against them as indigenous people, both of which have deeply rooted historical, political and ethno-religious dimensions to them (ibid.; see also Ding 2009; Aiken and Leigh 2011). A joint statement from four organisations, including JAG and the Centre for Orang Asli [Indigenous People's] Concerns, affirmed that

> The sexual abuse of Penan girls and women [is] not happening in isolation from the extreme violations of human rights perpetrated upon Penan communities as a whole. For decades, they have been fighting a losing battle against state-sanctioned seizure of their ancestral lands by loggers, large-scale plantations and other developers. In losing their native customary land rights, including sources of food crops and traditional hunting grounds, the Penans are left homeless and starving. Their vulnerability to violations of human rights is the product of decades of systematic disempowerment, in the sheer disregard for their rights as indigenous people and the prioritising of commercial interests over that of the Penans. Furthermore, there are serious allegations of collusion between state authorities and companies with commercial interests in the Penan lands. (JAG et al. 2009)

However, despite the attention that the plight of the Penan received, it appears that little progress was made in addressing the core issues faced be the Penan. Many people will not be surprised that the recommendations of a government task force that examined the issue were largely not

implemented—and much less the more comprehensive recommendations of the civil society mission (Penan Support Group et al. 2009; see also Penan Support Group 2013).

Stories such as this, as well as countless other gender injustices faced by women in Malaysia (e.g. WAO 2012), underscore the importance of having vibrant feminist civil society organisations, such as those that gather under the umbrella of JAG. It also highlights the need identified by WCI for more women in Malaysia's state and federal parliaments who will respond to the voices from feminist civil society as well as articulate and advocate for the array of issues facing Malaysian women. In closing, I recall now the 'shopping list' drawn up on a large but portable placard by WCI's fictional character Mak Bedah in her search for a political candidate that understood her concerns. As I noted in Chapter 3, her 'shopping list' could be construed as a reinforcement of the domestic sphere's connection to women. Alternatively, it could be criticised for having demands that were far too general, and too indirectly related to the concerns of women (e.g. a transparent, corruption-free government; responsible, equitable and sustainable development). However, what I understand now, especially in view my increasing appreciation of the interconnectedness of the oppressions that diverse people experience, is that Mak Bedah's shopping list was more insightful and sophisticated than I imagined in 2008, when I was amongst those who carried it as we confronted candidates while they hit the campaign trail to secure the votes of their constituents in the balmy evening air in Malaysia.

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Index