POWER

EXPRESSION

VIOLENCE

A Research on Women's Expression on Social Media in Malaysia

KRYSS NETWORK

Power X Expression X Violence:

A Research on Women's Freedom of Expression on Social Media in Malaysia

Written by Serene Lim
Edited by Angela M. Kuga Thas
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RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Anchored by the stories of 23 women[1], this research examines the inherent inequalities in women's access to freedom of opinion and expression, and the ways in which their exercise of this freedom invites online gender-based violence.

It forms part of KRYSS Network's ongoing efforts to enable equal access to freedom of opinion and expression across genders and to provide analysis of the access and exercise of this right from a feminist and gender perspective.

About the Organisation and Research Team

KRYSS Network is a not-for-profit organisation that has observed and researched how there is unequal access to freedom of opinion and expression in Malaysia, particularly for women and marginalised communities. This work, among other work that we do, focuses on promoting safer online spaces for all peoples so that they are better able to express their lived realities, experiences, opinions, thoughts, and human rights violations they have suffered, without threats of harassment and violence.

Research Objectives and Rationale

The research aims to address two dangerous assumptions, that: 1) the access to, and exercise of freedom of opinion and expression, is equal for all; and 2) the social media platforms are inherently emancipatory. Given how, historically, neutrality and egalitarian values in effect privilege cisgender men and cisgender men's experiences, such assumptions obscure rather than enable a diversity of voices and inevitably trivialise the cost of online gender-based violence.

In 2015, a Facebook post went viral, with a description of how the author planned to break into the house of then 69-year-old Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin, and sexually assault her after she called for a review of the Sharia laws, including on those related to *khalwat*[2]. She is the spokesperson for G25, a group of former high-ranking civil servants that encourages rational and progressive discourse on Islam. When told off on Facebook by someone else that it was

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1 The term "women" is used to include cisgender women, transgender women and female-presenting who identify as non-binary.
2 Close proximity between persons of the opposite sex

not funny to joke about sexual assault, the author of the said post scoffed and retorted that he was exercising his right to freedom of expression.[3]

In a separate incident, one woman was harassed on multiple social media platforms after she called out sexism in an article that conflated the purchase of a pair of cufflinks with fellatio as a great gift to one's boyfriend or husband for Christmas. Among others, the attacks denied the article as sexist and claimed she was unable to take a joke. The demand for an apology and retraction of the article by feminist activists was deemed a form of censorship by human rights lawyers and others, and therefore self-defeating to the principle of freedom of expression.[4]

These two instances point squarely to the lack of understanding of freedom of opinion and expressions. It is apparent that the demand for an absolutisation of freedom of opinion and expression and call for a blanket rejection of any form of censorship risks silencing and punishing women. Such an approach assumes that men and women enjoy equal access to and exercise of this freedom. It also overlooks sexism, discriminatory remarks, and online gender-based violence and passes these forms of speech as speech protected under this right. When harmful speech is weaponised against women's freedom of opinion and expression, it is weaponised against their public and political participation. Though social media has reduced the barriers for women to express their opinions and thoughts, access to social media does not necessarily translate into this freedom being equally enjoyed by women and gender non-conforming persons given the historical and structural inequalities that are also reproduced on technological platforms.

In Malaysia, and to some extent, globally, gender inequality is often and rightly addressed in terms of gender-based violence and gender discriminatory impacts. However, the impact of gender inequality in relation to freedom of opinion and expression is largely unaddressed. A framework for an unrestrained freedom of opinion and expression means very little to women if it ignores the inherent unequal power dynamics in our access to human rights and equal protection under the law.

Research Questions

The research seeks to develop substantive evidence that could contribute to the development and refinement of arguments for women's equal access to freedom of expression over social media. It recognises how these online spaces can effectively restrict and limit women's public and political participation, and as a result, deny women the right to shape and re-shape the dominant narrative. More importantly, the research calls for attention to the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other social locations producing multiple standpoints. The research, therefore, focuses on unearthing the power dynamics of various forms of expressions and the intersecting identities of the women; how our current understanding and practice of freedom of expression on social media have allowed online gender-based violence to grow with impunity and to the extent of normalising extremism and gender-based violence,

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3 No 'rape' threat just sarcasm, says man of post against G25's Noor Farida. (23 December 2015). *The Edge Markets.* https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/no-'rape'-threat-just-sarcasm-says-man-post-against-g25's-noor-farida
4 New, S.Y. (5 February 2014). Why so Serious? #Fellatio. *Loyar Burok* https://www.loyarburok.com/2014/02/05/serious-fellatio/

and; how freedom of expression is asserted by women and what are the subsequent responses to it.

Feminist Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

In selecting the research methods, the team made a conscious decision to position lived realities of women, in all their diversity, at the centre of knowledge-building. The intention was to unearth the power dynamics of various forms of expression from their standpoints. Like other research that adopt feminist methodologies, this research challenges the notion that knowledge is only situated in the researcher. Deliberate efforts were therefore taken to draw out the voices and experiences of women that are often invalidated and overlooked because they do not fit the mainstream perspectives.

Interview as a qualitative research method is selected as the main method to bring forward the narratives and experiences of 23 women (including lesbian, bisexual, transwomen and gender non-binary), complemented by desk research and a two-day participatory workshop. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used for the interview process so that the women are better able to enter into the research process as an active agent and not merely as an object of scrutiny. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify participants who are not within the immediate network of civil society organisations. The process started with identifying few women from the community of queer persons, young women studying in university and women who identified as feminists on social media and are not affiliated with civil society organisations. These women were then asked to identified other women who had also experienced online gender-based violence in the last few years.

Two main categories of research participants were identified for this research – 1) women, and 2) lesbian, bisexual, transwomen and queer (LBTQ). As the researcher, I recognise that the separation between women and LBTQ is a misleading construct and implies that the LBTQ are not women. It is however necessary to explicitly articulate the broader structural dynamics that tend to invalidate and make invisible the narratives of LBTQ women, even within the feminist and women's rights movement. Three women identified themselves as non-binary but acknowledge that they present as women to the world.

Five aggressors were also interviewed to better understand their interpretation of their behaviour and motivation for behaving aggressively towards women. Approaching the aggressors was not easy as the identified aggressors were not within the researcher's immediate network and they predominantly conversed in the colloquial Malay language. To work around the lack of access, the researcher started with creating an anonymous Twitter account that follows the accounts perceived to be from the conservative group, through which the researcher discovered several accounts that are from the conservative network. About a total of 30 interview requests had been sent out, but only five responded favourably. Two others had indicated interest but decided to pull out at the eleventh hour. In two interviews (one online text-based interview and one face-to-face interview), the researcher had to anonymise herself, partly for security, and partly to avoid the disposition of the researcher as a liberal, feminist and LGBT rights advocate.

These interviews were not meant to triangulate women's experience of online gender-based violence. For this research, an aggressor is defined as someone who has been part of an

online gender-based violence incident by making a deliberate expression on social media that caused violence or led to the distribution of violence against others. While the number interviewed, were few, these were conducted to inform the analysis of the data, and to better understand motivations behind the aggression, recognising fully that deeper analysis of online gender-based violence is much needed.

As earlier mentioned, a two-day participatory workshop was convened with eight women of which seven of them were interviewed for the research. One woman who had declined the research interview agreed to attend the workshop. During the workshop, preliminary findings of the research were shared with the women. This workshop was extremely important to check my biases and misinterpretations of the data. It proved incredibly useful because as the women shared their experiences, discussed and reflected, they also discovered new insights for themselves.

Ethical Consideration

The decision to anonymise everyone, including the aggressors was made to prevent further visibility to those who had experienced violence and the possibility of further violence. Relevant information that may lead to the identification of the women was also anonymised. However, the virality and high visibility of some of the cases meant that full anonymity is not possible. Given the circumstances, the organisation made a decision to limit the circulation of this research to trusted allies. Findings of the research will be disseminated through this research summary and infographics.

Discussion and Findings

Part I: Expression of the (Digital) Self

The findings of the research are categorised into three main parts. The first part of the findings, titled "Expression of the (Digital) Self" looks at how women express and perform themselves on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. While social media accorded women the opportunities for more visibility and spaces for expression, it does not always mean women are finally liberated and free to engage publicly and politically. The realities of women in the research show that their expression and performance of self are still subject to the alternate technological mode of society which takes on the unequal power dynamics of existing social and gender norms.

All women in the research, despite their various backgrounds, spoke about online gender-based violence as inevitable to their existence on social media and that the "*mind does not register it [as violence] anymore*". They commonly expressed a shared sense of fear and vulnerability on social media. To exist is to risk being harmed. The inevitable risk of online gender-based violence means women have to navigate between opportunities and vulnerabilities through the mediate performance of the self digitally, including self-censoring, full or partial anonymity, compartmentalization of different part of one across

Even though there has been some (but not much) advancements in women's public and political participation, women's visibility remains highly ordered by cultural values and societal expectations. A media professional was unable to post content about her personal fitness as it reduces her to a sexual object and the content was deemed "unsuitable" for her professional image as a current affair journalist. In this sense, the decision the women made in constructing their digital self and bodies (through the choice of name, visual photographs, profile description, friends or followers list and the type of content they made or shared) are guided and conditioned by their existing experiences and societal labels as women, Muslim, lesbian, fat, liberal, feminist and other social identities.

One main strategy used by women to navigate power digitally is through the fragmentation of the self across different social media sites based on the techno-social design of each platform. Instagram, as an image-focused platform is particularly powerful for self-expression through selfies, image-curating and self-branding. It is a site treated by most of the women as a non-political platform[5] or space for trivial narratives and for some, it is used to share "happiness" and "the best version of self".

Instagram facilitates a somewhat compulsory performance of the aspirational version of ourselves. These standards are predominantly dictated through the algorithm and the lens of your audience, which takes on the values of a heteronormative society. This in itself is a barrier to many women from expressing a part of themselves that do not conform to gender norms. The pressure to "fit in" according to these standards means that a Muslim lesbian is unable to share her happy moments with her partner or a trans fem person is fearful to put up photos of themself with make-up.

Facebook and Twitter are the two platforms most women used to express their political thoughts and are often compared to one another. Facebook, as compared to Instagram and Twitter, is the one that carries most of the women's embodied experiences and identities, and it is also over this platform, that people who are friends are known to them personally, including their family members. And it is for the reason of lack of anonymity on Facebook, presents a barrier to women's equal access to and exercise of their freedom of opinion and expression. The ability to anonymise in full or in part, in effect, ensures access that may have been denied to them because of gender norms, gender stereotypes and unequal gender-power dynamics. To some extent, anonymity is essential to the protection of one's physical safety. A Muslim woman in her mid-twenties chooses to stay semi-anonymous on Twitter after she was trolled and threatened with physical violence following her political expression several times. While remaining visibly as a Muslim woman, she uses an alias and never reveal too much of her personal details on Twitter, while stay unequivocal in expressing her thoughts around social inequalities. Anonymity promotes freedom of expression of topics and narratives that are normally censored and erased by the status quo.

The same tool of anonymity used by women to access freedom of opinion and expression is also exploited by aggressors to escape accountability. One aggressor shared that he is more aggressive on his anonymised Twitter account and would say things that he knew his friends and family disapprove of. With that said, the use of their real names did not stop the three other aggressors from perpetrating aggression online. In fact, one of the aggressors felt that

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5 This may have changed now after the resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter movement following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 where they have been an increase of social justice content on Instagram.

the generic nature of his name amidst a vast social network accorded him some level of protection for his aggression on Facebook and Twitter because he knew it will be almost impossible for others to trace it back to him. However, after seeing how everyday people can be doxxed and attacked makes him think twice before posting any comments online. Essentially, it is the sense of impunity and knowing that they can get away with the abuse that underlies the violence, and anonymity is a means through which they can achieve that.

In addition, our ability to express freely must be located within the context of surveillance through spectatorship and interactions with others on social media. Facebook as a space is where most of the women's social context collapse – it is an accumulation of family members, friends and acquittances from our physical lives who may or may not share the same values and interest as us. Whereas on Twitter, women are better able to network and connect with strangers who share the same goals, attitudes, and values as them. It is through our tweets and narratives that our identities are expressed and communicated. The ability to freely express ourselves or the need to censor our opinions are not isolated from cultural discourse, structure and practices within our network.

The visible queer narratives on a queer Muslim woman's Twitter account have allowed her to connect with like-minded people where she "*found people [to be] much more aligned with [her] ideas*". The same photograph of a cis gender woman would receive contrasting responses on Facebook and Twitter. On Facebook, her family members would comment rudely on her body size whereas on Twitter she would receive affirmation from her followers. She restricted herself from speaking about gender equality and LGBTQ rights issues on Facebook, knowing that her family members will not approve of it. The people and context around us can force us to make a very deliberate and conscious decision for our expression and self-censorship.

Women's performance and expression and self are based on decisions that are never frivolous and casual. They are driven by their embodied identities, social locations and structural inequalities and technological architectures and political visions of these social media platforms. Movement and efforts to ensure equal access and exercise of freedom of opinion and expression should start with acknowledging the inadequacy and the gaps in our knowledge when it comes to lived realities of those who are often ignored and marginalized. It means nothing should be created for us without us.

Part II: Expression and Violence

The second part of the findings investigate the messy entanglement of online gender-based violence with the intersectionality of identities and the inherent unequal access to freedom of opinion and expression; and how this entanglement of conflicts and power manifest itself within a complex system comprising global social media companies, algorithms, national governments, social structures and the people. While all the women experienced online gender-based violence because of their identity as women, the nature, intensity and impact of the violence differed based on their various intersecting identities and social locations. The stories of young women, queer Muslim women, women with disabilities, women journalists and fat women in this research illustrates the different ways in which violence is perpetrated and experienced against one's intersectional identity of the self. Understanding how oppression and discrimination mutually construct each other to create a unique experience for each woman is key in generating appropriate context-specific responses when addressing

online gender-based violence. For instance, for Nadia, a woman of disability, the aggression against her #metoo story was compounded by the social isolation and stigmatisation of people with disability as undesirable sexually and perceived inability to be a functioning member of society. Addressing online gender-based violence for women with disabilities would also require consciousness-raising around the right, dignity and autonomy of people with disabilities.

The women's stories also show that the violence they experience includes normalized abusive acts that are harmful in aggregate but do not meet the legal threshold of hate speech or criminal behaviour. This alludes to the broader and stickier conversation on the power of language and discourse. In one instance, the aggressor tweeted about the presence of LGBTQ at the 2019's women's march organized in Kuala Lumpur. She describes herself as an advocate for the causes of the women's march but believes being LGBTQ is against her religion and that the march was hijacked by the LGBTQ communities. In her tweet, she merely invited people to comment about the presence of pride flags in public spaces and insinuated that "this is where Malaysia is heading now". Her tweet was retweeted and shared by thousands of users and many responded with abusive and violent comments against LGBTQ persons, death threats and hate speech included. The absence of violent language in her tweet is justifiable to her as a legitimate expression of her views and political stance, even though it cascaded into hate and aggression by others towards LGBTIQ people.

Our language and discourse are not neutral and they engage with various structures and institutions of power to regulate our behaviours and expressions. Language and discourse produce and reproduce meanings, norms, stereotypes, otherness and discrimination. The absence of direct violent and abusive language in an expression does not necessarily obliviate one's responsibility in perpetuating harm, especially when they are in a position of power and influence to get people to react negatively to the issue or person they had intended.

These sorts of expressions often fell through the crack of "community standards" of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and in effect, disguising online gender-based violence as "freedom of expression". Those who are targeted face an increased risk of further violence with every single signal boost. At the height of the online mob attacks against the 2019 women's march in Kuala Lumpur, the hashtag #womensmarchmy was also populated by curious bystanders and people seeking business opportunities on Twitter. Even though they had no intention to cause harm, the algorithm was unable to discern the quality of every interaction and worked towards amplifying the harmful content that had the most interactions. The economic incentive of the algorithm to maximise the distribution of trending contents, which are usually boosted by online gender-based violence is counterintuitive to social media platforms' policies against hate speech and gender-based violence. The harm is heightened when our appreciation of freedom of opinion and expression is void of the gender lens, and narratives and discourse perpetrating online gender-based violence is seen as a mere exercise of one's freedom of opinion and expression.

Part III: Responding to Violence

The third part of the findings looks closely at the strategies and responses adopted by the women in the absence of effective remedies to online gender-based violence and the violation against women's freedom of opinion and expression. Given the failure of institutional support,

much of the efforts in responding to violence are transferred to the individual women and at times, the collective response of feminist networks or women's rights organisations. Only two out of twenty-three women interviewed made or attempted to make a police report on the online gender-based violence they had experienced. Even then, the law enforcers victim-blamed them and indicated that the harm was not serious. Given the circumstances, the "block" and "unfriend" button were regularly used by the women as part of their coping mechanism. Some had even adopted the tactic of preemptive muting by blocking trolls who had harassed other women. Many of the women had come to realise that people are not there to have a conversation and it is counterproductive to engage them. Blocking, disengaging and unfriending are important tactics for many women in this research to not expose themselves to hateful narratives and attacks.

Naming-and-shaming is also another strategy that some of the women employed. One woman had screenshot and tweeted all the misogynist comments against her under a long thread. In the interview, she shared it was a powerful moment when she was able to reclaim her power and narrative. Many sexual harassment survivors had also similarly called out their perpetrators on social media following the failure of the institutions or law enforcers to address their issues. The culture of online vigilantism is reflective of the fourth wave's feminist movement: individuated, micropolitical and do-it-yourself action.[6] It has proven to be effective in creating awareness and public discourse. However, often the individual bears the risks and costs i.e. increased physical vulnerability/lack of physical security, isolation, alienation, mental health, potential defamation suits, and lack of employment security.

Yet, women refused to sit and wait for the authorities to fix the issue they faced and are bypassing the institutional barriers to justice by doing it themselves. In some cases, the act of online vigilantism raised questions of boundaries and ethical considerations. Aggressors in less powerful positions received harassment and violence too on their end. While the act of speaking up is powerful and even necessary to break the status quo, instances in the past have shown that naming and shaming may be confusing for bystanders as most people are fixated in pinpointing one victim versus one aggressor, even though both would have experienced online violence. It also does not address the fundamental structural barriers for survivors to access justice and the cultural and societal prevalence of sexism that has worked against women survivors.

Research Recommendations

Moving Forward

Social media as a space for expression is highly contested where gender norms are persistent and yet, women are constantly pushing back and disrupting the normative discourse, at the risk of experiencing aggression and violence. More than anything, countering online gender-based violence does not stand in contradiction with freedom of opinion and expression. It requires an expansion of access to that freedom so that women and vulnerable groups can express themselves without the risk of reprisal from State and non-State actors.

Addressing online gender-based violence means holding people accountable for their individual power and privilege and the manner in which they exercise their freedom of opinion

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6 Emma A. Jane. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist digilantism. *Continuum*, 30:3, 284-297

and expression. It means to be actively aware that we live in a world where systemic discrimination against women is normalised and often reproduced in the digital and social media space. Therefore, to stay neutral is to perpetuate systemic discrimination and obstruct equal access to the right of freedom of opinion and expression. It requires us to understand that freedom of opinion and expression is not equally accorded to everyone and online gender-based violence is an important manifestation of unequal gender-power dynamics that dominates all spheres of our lives.

Elimination of online gender-based violence requires a rethinking of current strategies on gender based violence as it involves a range of rights between freedom of expression, right to political participation and right to non-discrimination, dignity and safety, which are in turn perceived as competing rights to vested interests in the politics of the country. It also involves globally dispersed actors—government, the people, and the digital platforms; the latter often located in a different jurisdiction.

KRYSS Network's research has also shown that the design and infrastructure of social media can fuel and encourage hate. In particular the underlying economic structure of platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram that relies on interactions among people. The more interactions there are, the more data they will capture which then informs the algorithm. The algorithm is designed to maximise the spread of viral content and this often includes inflammatory contents. Spaces in Twitter also restrict nuanced conversations and encourages debate and polarised arguments. At this stage, more research is needed to guide and experiment in different designs of platform architecture so that technologies can be employed to address the underlying issues of gender inequalities.

While laws are necessary in cases where severe harms are caused, online gender-based violence also comprises a range of abusive behaviours including targeted harassment, coordinated mob attacks, and deliberate stigmatisation and discrimination that does not amount to criminal harm, even though it may lead to an aggregation of harmfulness, especially in cases of an online mob attack.

There is a need for a multi-stakeholder approach and an inter-governmental agency response to online gender-based violence. This would require the deployment of multifaceted strategies, from the macro- to the micro-level, involving laws and policy reforms, implementation and expansion of prevention programs, research and monitoring etc.

To read the full research, please write to info@kryss.network for access.

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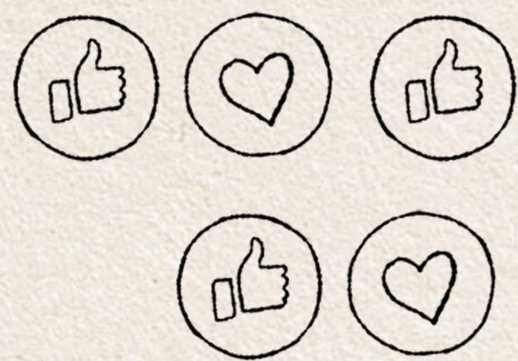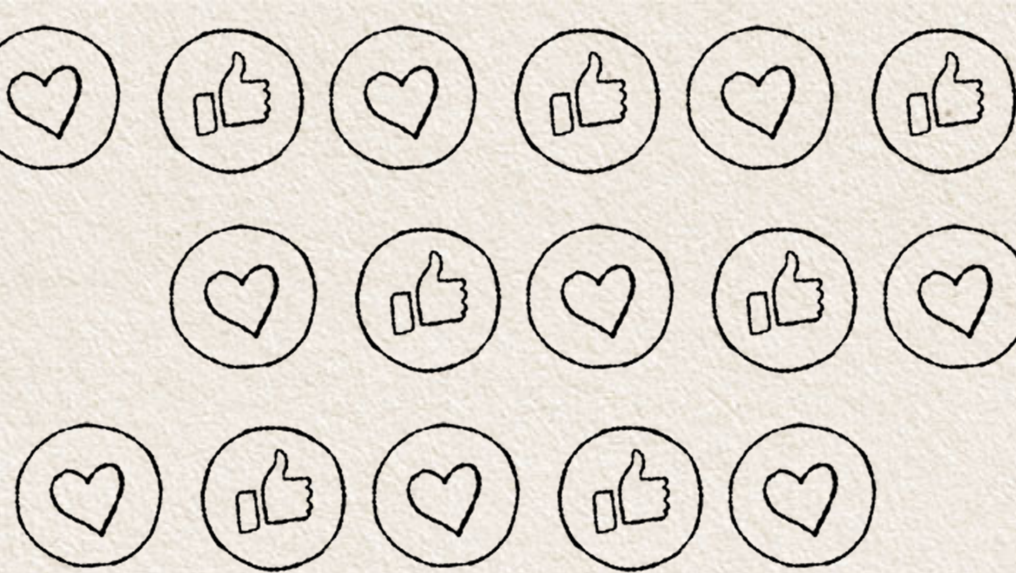
CONTACT

info@kryss.network
https://kryss.network/

Facebook: KRYSS Network
Twitter: @krYss_net
Instagram: @kryssnetwork