

THE USE OF ENGLISH IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN FEMINIST ACTIVISM

ALICIA IZHARUDDIN

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Abstract:

Feminism and the women's movement in Malaysia are products of specific historical and political contexts. Following this logic, the language used in feminist activism can also be seen as product of similar contexts. The focus of this article is the current state of the feminist movement in Malaysia and its linguistic framework as the effects of changes in language policy. This article then considers the use and relevance of feminist theory in Malaysian feminist activism as linked to the predominance of English in Malaysian feminist discourse. This article also argues that the predominance of English poses challenges to the inclusion of working-class class feminist agendas but offers opportunities in strengthening transnational feminist linkages. Language thus becomes an underlying issue which may explain the successful inroads and setbacks faced by feminist organizations in Malaysia. The issues of language and hegemony of this article couches itself within ongoing debates on Anglophone hegemony in feminist discourse in non-Western nations and how feminist concepts in English are engaged in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: Feminism, Malaysia, feminist theory, activism, language.

Introduction

This article discusses the role of language in disseminating contemporary feminist discourse in Malaysia and speculates on the ways historical processes related to changes in language policy, ethnic and class divisions have resulted in the predominance of English in Malaysian feminist activism. Insights on the use of English language in feminist discourse can be found through the voices of Malaysian activists and former activists themselves. The language of

feminism is relatively alien to the public discursive landscape in Malaysia where terms such as 'gender', 'sexuality', and even 'feminism' exist as loanwords. When 'gender' and 'sexuality' and their different linguistic incarnations reflective of the country's multilingual fabric appear at all, they are sporadic and usually enmeshed in the discourse of academia, activism, and human rights in the English language. In spite of these, feminism as a form of struggle for 'women's rights' is gradually becoming more accepted in Malaysian public discourse though it is still often considered a Western concept¹.

Although there is recognition of feminist activism in Malaysia, it is subsumed under the banner of women's struggle against discrimination and injustice. In other words, women's struggle is not always recognized as being a feminist one. Academics and activists alike have long struggled to define Malaysian feminism². However, I, like Ng, Mohamad, and Tan³ believe that the search of the definition of a Malaysian feminism is not urgent seeing as "it is pointless to seek an essential Malaysian feminism unique in its own identity or origins, given that territorial markers cannot curb cultural and ideological exchanges"⁴. Ng, Mohamad and Tan contend that there are various manifestations of feminisms in Malaysia that somehow defies a unitary identity and instead embraces the differences along sub-ideological lines. Surveys from the previous decades have shown that there is no radical or Marxist feminist movement in Malaysia. Instead, what it found was that most Malaysian women (and perhaps a few men) embrace a moderate or liberal form of feminism⁵. As we will see in the ensuing sections, the shape of feminist politics is molded in the cast of historical and political circumstances. Although women's liberation from oppression had been the one perennial goal of the women's and feminist movement in Malaysia since pre-independence, its specific goals within politics, ending gender-based violence, and faith-based inequality have witnessed shifts in emphasis across time. And as I will argue, the linguistic shape of feminist discourse is also determined by these historical and political circumstances. There is considerable literature on the development of the women's and feminist movement in Malaysia. However, language use in Malaysian feminist discourse has been given little attention by scholars. This lacuna requires attention due to the highly political nature of language policy in Malaysia where language use is linked with ethnicity, class, and at times with religion.

Three concerns with regards to the predominance of English in Malaysian feminist activism that animate the discussion in this article are as follows: firstly, in what ways have feminist activists working in English reclaimed the language and made feminist discourse in English 'Malaysian'?; secondly, what are the barriers and opportunities in communicating feminist discourse in languages other than English; and thirdly, to what extent are feminist theories incorporated or applied in activism considering the linguistic fluency of its practitioners? As a discussion on the use of English in Malaysian feminist activism, this article will first offer an overview of the language policy in Malaysia and how it has influenced the linguistic landscape of the local feminist discourse. This overview is followed by issues that have been constitutive of Malaysian feminism since political independence and the ways certain such issues and a common language have brought activists across different ethnic groups together.

Previous authors have pointed out the lack of engagement in Malaysian women's movement with feminist theory, citing the prioritization of working with women 'on the ground' rather than a preoccupation with feminist theory⁶. However, this article will show that different women's non-profit organizations (NGOs hereafter) do adopt feminist theory but selectively and at varying levels. What this article will also demonstrate is the extent of feminist theory's relevance as a guiding principle in Malaysian feminist activism and what its political implications are for feminist discourse in Malaysia as a whole. Adoption of feminist theory can be seen as one of the factors indicating the intellectualization of Malaysian feminist discourse. The language used for feminist theory in turn indicates the language associated with the intellectualization of Malaysian feminist discourse. The term 'feminist discourse' in the Malaysian context used in this article is a broad discursive category that takes into account western feminist frameworks and concepts and international women's and human rights discourse but applied in local cultural circumstances.

The uneasy embrace: English language in Malaysia

Language is a sensitive political issue in Malaysia closely intertwined with ethnicity and culture. As a nation home to 184 ethnic groups and their respective languages and cultural traditions⁷, the balance of diversity and national cohesion through language is a delicate one. Over half of the Malaysian population is represented by the Malays, followed by Chinese and Indian Malaysians. As a postcolonial nation liberated from British rule, Malaysia has retained the dominance of English in its language policy despite a few changes in language policy producing bilingual and multilingual citizens with some whose first language is English. In the ensuing years after 1957, Malaysia first introduced *Bahasa Melayu* as the national language in an attempt of superseding the dominance of English and establishing a national identity through a drastic change in language policy. From being the medium of educational instruction during colonialism, English was reduced to being taught as a second language in schools. In rural areas where there is little to no exposure to the English language other than an often sub-standard school English lessons, English is perceived as a foreign language⁸.

The impulse behind the change in language policy in the early years of postcolonial Malaysia was spurred by the recognition of the link between medium of instruction in schools and socio-economic mobility. English language schools were primarily located in urban areas attended by non-Malays and a few Malays from upper middle class backgrounds. English-medium education was, in the preceding years before independence, associated with an "identification of a racial group with a particular type of vocation or industry and hence its identification with wealth or poverty"⁹. Legally establishing Malay as the national language would offer the historically disadvantaged Malays the educational and administrative capital upon which to develop themselves as largest ethnic group. There was little room for resistance by non-Malays against such a cultural and linguistic imposition: the introduction of Malay as the national language was used as a bargaining tool for the acquisition of national citizenship of non-Malays who arrived in British Malaya for trade and colonial-led development¹⁰. However, despite its status as the national

language of Malaysia and the creation of a state-run institution dedicated to its advancement, the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute for Language and Literature), the Malaysian language continued to provide fewer social and global economic opportunities than the English language in the post-independence period. The use of Malay and English is unevenly distributed across the public and private sectors, with English dominating the latter. Despite the huge efforts by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in introducing new technological words in the 1980s, translation of books into Malay from other languages had since been a slow process¹¹. Responding to the economic shifts towards a knowledge-based economy in the 1990s, the national language policy switched to a wider use of English particularly in science and technology by the early 2000s, destabilizing the usage of Malay for technological and economical purposes. While there were no attempts to displace Malay as the national language, the rhetoric of language as constitutive of national identity had to compete (often unsuccessfully) with capitalist demands that position English as a global language of economic opportunity.

Widely spoken especially in urban areas, English is used as a strategic and convenient medium to communicate women's rights and feminist ideas and the discourse of human rights. The rise of English as a primary medium of Malaysian public and intellectual discourse has partly also been a product of the Malaysian state government's embrace of globalization in the 1990s¹². English as the language of academia had been promoted by the Malaysian government in 1994 and 1995 to improve the intellectual and institutional standards of universities. Malaysian feminist activism can be seen as participating in a public and intellectual discourse that was impacted by globalization and state initiatives to boost Malaysia's knowledge-based economy. A mention on the external forces that influence the increasing take-up of English is pertinent here. Globalization of English, characterized by, *inter alia*, the dominance of English in global media networks and international communities, entails challenges and opportunities for contemporary Malaysia. But far from ideologically neutral, globalized English comes pre-packaged with new forms of political and cultural baggage. Moreover, the globalization of the English language is more a reflection of the economically driven hegemony than the geographic spread of speakers across the globe. Thus the predominance of English in twenty-first century Malaysia continues to grow through the prioritization of English in higher education, explosion of English language courses and imported mass media from the United States, Britain, and Australia.

The discursive trajectory of feminism in Malaysia

The earliest calls for feminist emancipation emerged during the turn of the twentieth century. Inspired by Muslim reformers during their studies in Cairo, Syed Syekh Al-Hadi and Zainal Abidin Ahmad, better known as Za'ba, were Malay male intellectuals whose writings on women's liberation began the stirrings of emancipation of Malay people not only on gender-oriented terms, but against colonialism. Their writings appeared in Malay journals such as *al-Ikhwān* (1926-1931) and *Saudara* (1928-1941), publications that were heavily influenced by Egyptian modernist magazines¹³. Women played an important role in agitating Malaysia's political

independence from the British in 1957 but their participation had been oriented towards nationalist sovereignty rather than personal autonomy¹⁴. Basic rights conferred to all citizens such as voting and equality before civil law were easily won as they were enshrined in the country's Constitution at the time of independence. There were active women's anti-colonial organizations but nearly all were divided along ethnic and ideological lines¹⁵: Malay women fought for political liberation under the banner of male-dominated anti-imperialist nationalist Malay parties, immigrant women of Indian ancestry fought for the anti-colonial cause in India while immigrant women of Chinese ancestry aligned themselves with anarchist parties, local communist parties, and the political cause in China.

In the early decades after independence, women's political organizing continued to be a reflection of the prevailing ethnicity-based sectarian politics. Even when issues regarding equal pay and female representation in politics were debated nationally, the leadership structures of such campaigns were divided by ethnicity and by effect, language. It was through the emergence of autonomous and semi-autonomous women's NGOs¹⁶ in the 1980s that a feminist and consciously non-sectarian organizing amongst women formally took root¹⁷. The first women's NGOs devoted themselves to functioning as a shelter for women from domestic abuse and as a site for counseling, legal assistance, and advocacy. Gender-based violence became an issue that may have found universal support across ethnic and religious lines seeing as all women were potential victims of violence, but it was a campaign dominated by non-Malay and middle-class urban-based women in which English played a cohesive role. During this phase of the movement, the notion of 'feminism' took up a more radical and highly politicized form as it meant aligning with a human rights discourse and pressuring for legal reform as a separate political lobby rather than part of a larger male-dominated organizational structure - contemporary Malaysian feminist activism in English can be seen as originating from this point in history.

By the 2000s, efforts to campaign against gender-based violence found support across all women's organizations, whether they were aligned with the state, Islamic feminist, or were liberal feminists¹⁸. Since its initial discourse on *Violence against Women* as the main cause for feminist organizing in the 1980s, Malaysian feminism discourse has shifted to Gender-based Violence which takes into account men who are also victims of abuse and violence. At present, Malaysian feminist activists have appropriated western feminist discourse on rape by emphasizing notions of consent and shifting the attention away women's responsibility to prevent sexual violence. A reworking of the radical feminist concept of 'rape culture' is a new entrant into the Malaysian feminist discourse as it is enunciated in official statements issued by women's organizations. Rape culture is understood by Malaysian feminists as a cultural continuum that normalizes the treatment of women as sexual objects and trivialization of rape and sexual assault¹⁹. These are but a few indicators that some Western feminist concepts are continually absorbed into local feminist discourse to correspond with local concerns. Trends in the adoption of concepts show that Malaysian feminist discourse is sensitive and responsive to the development of feminist theory originating primarily from the West.

In Malaysia, feminist political demands are in constant tension with an increasingly conservative federal government. By implication, feminist and women NGOs have experienced numerous obstacles in public policy-making throughout the decades in their engagement with the state. Moreover, the growing conservatism of Islamic policies in predominantly Muslim Malaysia since the 1990s in particular have created a socio-political climate that was hostile to Muslim women^{20 21 22}. This is not to say that women were completely powerless and not actively instrumental to the Islamisation of public life in Malaysia. Rather, highly educated and socially mobile young Muslim women participated in both practical and symbolic ways²³ to assert a new Islamic identity in support of the Islamic resurgence²⁴. It was during this period of Islamisation across Malaysia when feminist politics began to focus on mitigating sexist policies emboldened by state Islam. At the forefront of challenging faith-based patriarchal legal structures is the prominent feminist organization for Muslim women, Sisters in Islam (SIS). Since its founding in 1993, SIS has been a main centre of legal recourse for Muslim women and an advocate for legal reform along Islamic feminist lines. Islamic feminism in Malaysia adopts the fundamental liberal feminist value of rights but through a pro-women interpretation of Islamic sacred texts. Proponents of Islamic feminism in Malaysia challenge the patriarchal versions of Sharia family and personal laws and seek to reform them through the principle of *ijtihad* (reasoning) and *ijma'* (reaching a decision by consensus)^{25 26}. All issues related to the well-being of Muslim women in Malaysia have fallen under the purview of SIS although in recent years, polygamy, moral policing, and underage marriage have become the primary sites of contestations between SIS and Malaysian religious authorities.

The shape of Malaysian feminist discourse is both facilitated and hindered by its ambivalent relationship with the state. Interested in women's votes, the present Malaysian government can make concessions to the demands of feminist NGOs. But the government has at times been embroiled in a power struggle for political legitimacy with the country's biggest Islamic party, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (The Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party, PAS) and the Oppositional coalition of which PAS is a coalition member - a power struggle that impacts on gender and sexuality policies. In an attempt to also win over the majority Malay-Muslim electorate, a constituent influenced by decades of Islamisation of public life, the Malaysian government has inserted conservative Islamic demands to various gender-oriented legislation and international conventions²⁷. The result of such a political compromise has been the unsatisfactory introduction and reform of public policies and laws that do not fulfill their egalitarian goals.

The issues in Malaysian feminist discourse outlined above have emerged as both resistance to and opportunities for action opened up by the prevailing politics of the times. Despite showing tendencies in political organizing along ethnic and linguistic lines, gender-based violence and religious issues have become sites of feminist contestation around which feminists of all persuasions and ethnic/religious background unite in a predominantly English voice.

Method and site of study

The site of the study are three women's organizations based in Petaling Jaya out of six women's organizations in Peninsular Malaysia that function simultaneously as advocacy centers and shelters for women and their children. Petaling Jaya is one of the most populated and industrialized cities in Malaysia. Originally developed as a satellite township of Kuala Lumpur, it is home to 55% ethnic Chinese Malaysians, 30% Malays, and 13% Indian Malaysians²⁸. This study, conducted between November 2012 and February 2013, utilizes a qualitative approach, foregrounding the voices and experiences of Malaysian female and male feminist activists who are either still working or previous members of feminist NGOs in Peninsular Malaysia. Four middle-class feminist activists of different ethnic backgrounds were first interacted in person to build rapport and later interviewed via email correspondence in their preferred language, English, on issues relating to the use of English in activism, the challenges in using other Malaysian languages, and the relevance of feminist theory in their work. Although the sample is very small, as key members and former long-serving members of their organization, their insights acutely represent not only their own personal experiences as long-time members but the prevailing culture of their organizations.

The dominance of English in Malaysian feminist activism and its implication on the use of feminist theory

The 'hegemony' of the English language in feminist discourse and its imposition on non-Anglophone feminism has been addressed by a few authors^{29 30}. At the centre of such critiques is the rendering of non-English feminist discourse and its subjects, especially those produced in non-Western contexts, as 'other'³¹. But this is not to say that non-Anglophone feminists who use English to express feminist discourse are engaging in self-effacing politics. In a study by McMahill (2001), Japanese women in feminist English classes deploy English as an access to alternative gender ideologies and feminist ideas in ways that empower them. This is because the women find the inherent structure of the Japanese language oppressive against women and that English not only less hierarchical but widely seen as associated with feminism³². To mitigate the dominance of Anglophone feminism, Descarries suggests finding "ways of establishing a better inter-linguistic communication in feminist studies in order to encompass our historical, cultural, spatial and linguistic ways of being feminists and thinking feminism, alleviate the tensions of a privileged linguistic hegemony and leave room for the absence of consensus while remaining in complete solidarity"³³. The ensuing section of this article explores the possibilities in Malaysian feminist activism that address the foregoing suggestion.

At present, most campaigning materials and local publications on feminism, gender and sexuality available in Malaysia are in English. The preponderance of English in Malaysian feminist activism may be a reflection of linguistic backgrounds of its propagators in activism and academia. Present-day feminisms in Malaysia arise from the work of activists who organize from women's

centers set up in cities throughout Peninsular and East Malaysia by women of urban and middle-class origins. Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual 'intellectualization' of women's movements in Malaysia, particularly in Muslim women's groups. Female academics, lawyers, writers, artists, and journalists became members of feminist NGOs during this period, particularly in Muslim feminist groups³⁴. However, the over-representation of urban middle-class women and men in feminist activism in Malaysia marginalizes the concerns of working class women whose issues are not usually expressed in fluent English (for a discussion on the historical challenges in working with rural and working class women, see Ng, Mohamad, and Tan (2006)). The difficulty of reconciling class subjectivities and feminist academia has been discussed by a number of feminist academics³⁵. However, there is to date little to no rigorous discussion on the connection between class subjectivities and feminist identification in Malaysia and its impact on activism.

Despite the imbalance of feminist discourse in English in Malaysia, it is not an indication that Malaysians who engage with media in languages other than English are not interested in issues related to feminism and women's rights. The main issue connected with the predominance of English in feminist discourse is access to feminist knowledge at large. Most of the textual material on feminism outside the realm of activism in the form of books and popular articles in the media available to the reading public are mainly in English. Unlike in Indonesia, where many books on feminism are translated from English into the Indonesian language, feminist books in Malaysia are available in book shops and libraries in their original language i.e. mostly in English. Reina*, who works as a program officer in the Women's Aid Organization (WAO), argues that the lack of access to feminist discourse in languages other than English is compounded further by the difficulty on the part of feminist NGOs in getting a slot on non-English radio stations and opportunities to publish in non-English language newspapers. In contrast, there are many opportunities for the publication of official statements and interviews with feminist activists in English language newspapers and on radio respectively.

The heavy use of English in feminist discourse has however allowed a relatively easy adoption (and at times critical rejection) of feminist theory in the organizational structure of NGOs. But in Malaysia, as elsewhere, there is recognition that there is rarely a perfect fit between theory and practice³⁶. There are other reasons that make feminist theory less congruent to the needs and lived experiences of Malaysian women. Dominant Western feminist theory has been unfairly criticized by activists alike on the grounds of being Eurocentric, middle-class, cis-centric, heteronormative, and largely neglectful non-White and non-Western experiences while at the same time ignoring the rich sometimes under-emphasized history of feminist struggles by non-Western women across ethnic, religious, and class lines. However, a critical assessment of Western feminist theory does not effect in a phasing out theory from activism altogether. Rather, the feminist critique of patriarchy in the structural oppression of women is the foundational framework to understanding the prevalence of violence against women in all feminist and women's NGOs in the country. But there is a sense that a Western-derived theory of patriarchy is adopted as vessels into which the experiences of local women are 'poured' in. The development of local theories that better reflect the lived experiences of Malaysian women very rarely employed as frameworks of analysis

by activists. These theories have been developed by sociologists and anthropologists of gender relations in Malaysia whose work are often positioned within the peripheries of the (Western) feminist 'canon'.

Gatri, a former activist of a feminist NGO, found that many feminist activists who had worked with her in Malaysia have a working knowledge of Western feminist theory. Those who did not have such a background understood gender-based inequality in two ways: the structural permeation of patriarchy and the gendered hierarchy of power - men asserting their dominance over women. However, an understanding of how gender-related injustice intersects with other social categories such as class, sexuality, and (dis)abilities are rarely considered. Reina of WAO concurs with Gatri's assertion of feminist theory's relevance in their activism. At WAO, feminist theory guides the women's group's work but the biggest source of inspiration and information for the organization are the lived realities of women they assist and campaign for. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of *intersectionality* is applied in WAO for developing an analytical framework around issues concerning domestic violence in Malaysia. Intersectionality is the point of contact or 'crossroads' made between social categories³⁷. Intersectional analysis recasts sexism as a form of oppression that is not based solely on gender and urges feminists to extend their energies to studying other power dimensions such as class, race, and sexuality particularly in the neglected social locations in which two (or more) of these dimensions intersect³⁸.

In the context of Islamic feminism in Malaysia, Quranic texts, hadiths, and feminist scholarship in Islam are core materials for activists working within the organization. According to one activist at SIS, Sarinah*, the founding of SIS had been based on a Muslim feminist orientation. Although there is an immediate engagement with texts from the Quran, *hadith* and *sunnah* (acts and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad respectively), activists at SIS employ what they understood as 'Western Second Wave feminism' as a framework to understand the impact of patriarchy on Muslim gender relations. Most of the feminist jargon used in SIS's activism is in English, although there is material on feminism, gender, and sexuality in the Malay language. Technical concepts in Western feminist theory are applied in research on Muslim women in Malaysia or as Sarinah asserts are 'transcended', by making Muslim women's lived experiences as the main points of reference. SIS organizes regular 'study sessions' during which local and international academics present their research findings and conduct group discussions on new methods and insight into scholarship on Islam and gender. Such sessions are usually open by invitation to interested parties outside of SIS and usually conducted in English.

But not all activists agree that feminist theory is engaged critically within their NGO. For Ellie*, a former activist at All Women's Action Society (AWAM), feminism is promoted 'superficially' by AWAM as a women-centric concept employed in advocacy work for the improved status and rights of women. At AWAM, training, campaign materials, and publications tend to be 'theory and analysis-lite' according to Ellie. Despite its role in the shift from the campaigning discourse of 'Violence Against Women' to 'Gender-based Violence' to presumably considers men as victims, the feminist perspective at AWAM still focuses on women only and have yet to provide counseling services to transgender individuals and men who suffer from gender-based violence.

Ellie asserts that an impediment to a holistic activism may be attributed to the lack of a theoretical framework as a vantage point from which to view 'the bigger picture' of gender-based oppression. Although a number of individual activists within AWAM are versed in Western feminist and queer theory, the knowledge and application of theory do not translate into its incorporation into the training, official campaigning material and statements. The relative influence of feminist theory in Malaysian feminist activism may be a reflection of the unequal power structures within feminist knowledge production on the transnational level. The asymmetrical relationship between who theorizes and who is theorized is a reflection of the inequality that exists in the global economic order and the privileged status universities in the West have both in terms of resources and epistemological authority³⁹. It comes to no surprise then that activists in so-called developing nations have an ambivalent position towards feminist theories that bear no resemblance to their experiences, branding them Eurocentric or simply 'alien'.

Lack of financial resources and time on the part of activists may be related to the difficulty in engaging with feminist theory more deeply much less opportunities to develop theory. Based on Gatri's experiences in working in feminist NGOs in Malaysia, time devoted to meetings with other NGOs and the workload expected of staff members squeezed out a lot of time for theoretical reflection. Some feminist NGOs face a problem with lack of funding from local and international donors for the training and field research of their staff. Inevitably, lack of financial resources translates to fewer appointments of new members of staff to manage various projects and administrative responsibilities. Internal constraints, along with external ones via the movement's unstable relationship with the state, constitute challenges to making expedient gains for all women in need. An awareness of English's predominance in Malaysian feminist activism has resulted in the concerted effort by NGOs to producing official publications and other campaigning materials in all the main languages of Malaysia: Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. However, these efforts have some time to go before decentering the hegemony of English in Malaysian feminist discourse and de-link feminist issues from middle-class concerns.

There are a variety of other issues that can further refine an analysis of the feminist women's movement in Malaysia as a way of developing a keen perspective on its successes and setbacks over the years. Such issues include the members' behind the feminist NGOs class and educational background impact on the intellectual and legal discourse in Malaysia. There are Gender Studies programs in universities throughout Malaysia taught in both English and Malay, and the interest has certainly grown in the last decade. Continued and sustained collaboration between feminist academics and activists can contribute greatly to the production of locally grounded feminist knowledge and increase the impact of Malaysian feminism on mainstream scholarship. There is much value in allocating time for academic study sessions to update activists on the current theoretical trends. However, lack of time and energy on the part of busy activists means that theory should be incorporated directly into the nine to five work schedule of social workers, counselors, and officers rather than outside of weekly working hours.

Concluding remarks

English has long been the lingua franca of the urban and elite middle classes of all the main ethnic groups prior to the inception of Malaysia as a country. Changes in language policy and inconsistent development of the national language have resulted in continued dominance of English in Malaysia. This means that much of intellectual discourse, feminism included, is largely the preserve of the urban middle classes. Even then, the application and development of theory have not always been the priority in the advocacy work of Malaysian feminist NGOs. Meanwhile, the knowledge produced through the experiences of many social workers and counselors who were working class and have minimal background in western feminist theory are also taken as contributors to the discourse. In fact, their experiences and subjectivities as the site of knowledge production particularly of what it means to be a woman can form the basis of feminist standpoint epistemology. Furthermore, the use of English in feminist activism facilitates the entry of Malaysian feminists and their concerns into in the transnational feminist 'community'. Linguistic barriers, just as much as unequal economic barriers, have been one of the limitations in the forming successful transnational feminist connections⁴⁰. Another advantage of the use of English for communicating feminist discourse is that English has become a common linguistic site in Malaysia's ethnically and linguistically fragmented society.

* All names of activists are pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Clarissa Lee and the activists of Sisters in Islam, AWAM, and WAO.

Notes

1. Rohana Ariffin, "Feminism in Malaysia: A Historical and Present Perspective of Women's Struggles in Malaysia", *Women's Studies International Forum* 22 (1999): 417.

2. Ariffin, "Feminism in Malaysia", 473.
3. Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, and Tan Beng Hui, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 1.
4. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 1.
5. Shymala Nagarajah, *Malaysian women today*, (Kuala Lumpur: Women's Affairs Division, 1995) quoted in Ariffin, "Feminism in Malaysia", 421.
6. Virginia H. Dancz, *Women in party politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987) quoted in Ariffin, "Feminism in Malaysia", 417.
7. The Joshua Project, 2012. <http://www.joshuaproject.net>, Accessed on 15 February 2013.
8. Saran Kaur Gill, "Language Policy in Malaysia: Reversing Direction", *Language Policy* 4 (2005): 244.
9. Asmah Hj Omar *Malay in its sociocultural context*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. 1987: 63
10. Gill, "Language Policy in Malaysia: Reversing Direction", 246
11. Gill, "Language Policy in Malaysia: Reversing Direction", 252
12. Sumit K. Mandal, "Reconsidering Cultural Globalization: The English Language in Malaysia", *Third World Quarterly*, 21 (2000), 1002.
13. Zanariah Noor. Gender Justice and Islamic Family Law Reform in Malaysia, *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, 2007: 128.
14. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 39
15. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 40
16. Some women's organizations in Malaysia saw an importance in engaging with the state especially with regards to the demands for legislative change around Violence Against Women (VAW) in the 1980s. Their ideological stance on feminism was 'immaterial' as they needed to somewhat extend de-radicalize when writing memorandums to authorities in order to not appear militant or extreme.
17. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 69.
18. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 101.
19. Dianne F. Herman, "The rape culture", in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman, (Berkshire: MacGraw-Hill, 1994), 45.

20. Zainah Anwar, "What Islam, Whose Islam? : Sisters in Islam and the struggle for women's rights", in *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 227.
21. Rebecca Foley, "Muslim Women's Challenge To Islamic Law: The Case of Malaysia, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 6 (2004), 56.
22. Julian C. H. Lee, *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2010), 3.
23. The wearing of the veil or *tudung* became a political marker of resistance to the 'establishment' Islam of the time. 'Establishment' Islam, considered moderate but reactionary by Islamic political parties, was represented by the Malay-Muslim governing political party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).
24. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 85-86.
25. Anwar, "What Islam, Whose Islam?", 231.
26. Yasmin Moll, "People like us" in pursuit of God and rights: Islamic feminist discourse and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11 (2009), 45-50.
27. Ng, Mohamad, and Tan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia*, 100.
28. Total population by ethnic group, Local Authority area and state, Malaysia, 2010, <http://www.statistics.gov.my>, Accessed on the 28th May 2013.
29. Winter, Bronwyn, '(Mis)representations: What French Feminism Isn't', *Women's Studies International Forum* 20 1997.
30. Francine Descarries, *The Hegemony of the English Language in the Academy: The Damaging Impact of the Sociocultural and Linguistic Barriers on the Development of Feminist Sociological Knowledge, Theories, and Strategies*, *Current Sociology*, (2003):
31. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Revisited*, in *Feminism without borders*, Durham: Duke University Press. 2006.
32. Cheiron McMahill. 'Self-Expression, Gender and Community: A Japanese Feminist English Class', in *Multilingualism, Second Language Learning, and Gender*, edited by Aneta Pavlenko, Adrian Blackledge, Ingrid Piller, Marya Teutsch-Dwyer 2001: 310
33. Descarries, "The Hegemony of the English Language in the Academy", 630.
34. Ariffin, "Feminism in Malaysia", 421.
35. Dianne Reay, "The Double-Bind of the 'Working-Class' Feminist Academic: The Success of Failure and the Failure of Success' in *Class Matters: "Working Class" Women's Perspectives On*

Social Class, ed. Christine Zmroczek (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 19-20.

36. Foley, "Muslim Women's Challenge To Islamic Law", 55.
37. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), 1245.
38. Leslie McCall, "The complexity of intersectionality", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30 (2005), 1551.
39. Manuh, "Doing Gender Work in Ghana", 142.
40. Vera Mackie, "The Language of Globalization, Transnationality, and Feminism", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3 (2001), 197.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anwar, Zainah. 'What Islam, Whose Islam? : Sisters in Islam and the Struggle For Women's Rights', in *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia*, edited by Robert W. Hefner, 227-252. University of Hawaii Press. 2001.

Ariffin, Rohana. 'Feminism in Malaysia: A Historical and Present Perspective of Women's Struggles in Malaysia', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22 (1999): 417-423.

Asmah, Hj. Omar. *Malay in its sociocultural context*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. 1987.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991): 1241-99.

Dancz, Virginia H. (1987) *Women in Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press. 1987.

Descarries, Francine. 'The Hegemony of the English Language in the Academy: The Damaging Impact of the Sociocultural and Linguistic Barriers on the Development of Feminist Sociological Knowledge, Theories, and Strategies', *Current Sociology*, 51 (2003): 625-636.

Foley, Rebecca. 'Muslim Women's Challenge to Islamic law: The Case of Malaysia', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 6 (2004): 53-84.

Gill, Saran Kaur. 'Language Policy in Malaysia: Reversing Direction', *Language Policy*, 4 (2005): 241-160.

Herman, Dianne F. 'The Rape Culture, in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, edited by Jo Freeman, 45-53, Berkshire: MacGraw-Hill.1994.

Nagarajah, Shyamala. *Malaysian Women Today*, Kuala Lumpur, Women's Affairs Division. 1995.

Ng, Cecilia, Maznah, Mohamad, and Tan, Beng Hui. *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*, Oxford: Routledge. 2006.

Reay, Diane. 'The Double-Bind of the 'Working-Class' Feminist Academic: The Success of Failure and the Failure of Success' in *Class Matters: "Working Class" Women's Perspectives On Social Class*, edited by Christine Zmroczek. London: Taylor and Francis. 1997.

Joshua Project. "Ethnic Groups of Malaysia." Accessed on 7 March, 2013.
<http://www.joshuaproject.net/>

Lee, Julian C.H. *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies. 2010.

Mackie, Vera. 'The Language of Globalisation, Transnationality, and Feminism', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3 (2001): 180-206.

Mandal, Sumit K. Reconsidering Cultural Globaliaation: The English Language in Malaysia, *Third World Quarterly*, 21 (2000): 1001-1021.

Manuh, Takyiwaa. 'Doing Gender Work in Ghana', in *Africa after gender?*, edited by Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescherpp, 125-149, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2007.

McCall, Leslie. 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30 (2005): 1771-1800.

McMahill, Cheiron. 'Self-Expression, Gender and Community: A Japanese Feminist English Class' in *Multilingualism, Second Language Learning, and Gender*, edited by Aneta Pavlenko, Adrian Blackledge, Ingrid Piller, Marya Teutsch-Dwyer, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 2001.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Under Western Eyes: Revisited*, in *Feminism Without Borders*, Durham: Duke University Press. 2003.

Noor, Zanariah Gender Justice and Islamic Family Law Reform in Malaysia, *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, 2007: 121-156.

Winter, Bronwyn '(Mis)representations: What French Feminism Isn't', *Women's Studies International Forum* 20(1997): 211-24.