Malay Women: Religion and Social Freedom

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Introduction

Starting in the 1950s, Malay women, who had earlier been confined to the domestic realm of social life, began to intrude into the male-dominated public sphere. The process was triggered by the disintegration of the traditional Malay economy due to factors such as the commercialization of agriculture, monetization, technological innovation, the expansion of formal education and the introduction of party politics. Nowadays, the extent of women’s participation in society-at-large does not merely reflect certain trends in societal growth and development; it also has important implications for gender relations and for the cultural evaluation of the moral and social worth of women. In Malaysia, Islam, both as a religion and a philosophical system, shows great sensitivity to changes in the status, rights and potential of women. Ever since its introduction into the Malay peninsula some five hundred years ago, Islam, together with certain indigenous beliefs, actually helped to devalue Malay women socially. However, consistent with the ideal of an egalitarian culture that the Islamic religion seeks to establish, there are elements within the Islamic religious tradition that have attempted, at various times throughout Malaysian history, to address the issue of social freedom for women. These attempts have been undertaken by individuals and groups who have seen the need to legitimise—in religious terms—irreversible and on-going social processes. The emancipation of women is

one of these processes. It is also a phenomenon which members of the religious élite feel compelled to react to because the process undermines one major assumption in the prevailing belief system of the Malays—one which Islam itself has helped to perpetuate to a certain extent: namely, that women are inferior to men.

This paper is basically concerned with the response of certain religiously inclined and socially sensitive segments of the Malay population to the phenomenon of social freedom for women, which, as mentioned earlier, is more evident now than at anytime in the past. To place this discussion in its proper historical perspective, the paper will examine the religious ideologies of Islamic reform movements in pre—and post—independence Malaysia. More specifically, it will show in what way—and to what extent—religious reformers can help to resolve the issue of female subordination, which is continually being brought into question as more and more Malay women become engaged in outside employment. The reform movements referred to here are the Islah Islamiyah and dakwah movements which were active during the colonial and post—independence periods respectively. Both movements actually represent efforts at redefining Islamic orthodoxy and orthodox teachings throughout the country. They are relevant in the present analysis because in the rationalization process, religious reformers are forced to balance women’s role in the country’s labor force with the demands of Islam.

Malay Women in Pre—Reformation Times

Historical evidence shows that Malays adopted Islam sometime during the fifteenth century. Reconstructions of the culture of the Malays prior to the coming of Islam reveal that they lived in communities called kampung built along rivers or along the coast. The economic activities which formed the basis of their livelihood included rice farming, animal husbandry, petty trading and fishing. Malay kampung were essentially unified kinship groups presided over by elders (orang tua-tua) whose collective responsibility was to administer the affairs of their respective villages. The penetration of Indian cultural elements in the first century A.D., in particular the doctrine concerning the distinct stratification of society according to an individual’s status—an idea implicit in the caste system, modified the hitherto egalitarian nature of Malay villages. Individuals and groups who used to associate with one another as equals were ranked as either superior or inferior to one another based on factors such as one’s age, sex, lineage and political position. Given the nature of such a social

system, women did not fare well. Concepts of purity and pollution implicit in Malay beliefs concerning the divinity of rulers and purification rites threw physical differences between men and women into sharp relief and justified the practice of assigning women social roles that in turn were considered to be at a lower rung of the social hierarchy. Thus, regardless of whether they were of aristocratic or peasant origin, in pre-Islamic times, Malay women were confined to the home, undertaking such domestic chores as child rearing, cooking, mending, weaving and housekeeping. Although peasant women were known to have rendered their husbands and male siblings assistance during the rice-planting and harvesting seasons, their involvement in the economy however was not so highly rated compared to the kind of undertakings associated with men such as trading, hunting, and serving as palace guards and warriors. In a cultural milieu of this nature women had little chance of upward social mobility. To improve their social status, Malay women had no other recourse but to depend on their male relatives, in particular their fathers and husbands. Marriage thus provided the best means by which a woman could assume a new social role viz: that of wife, mother, and grandmother. Their new status and role, however, did not necessarily mean that women would be elevated to a position that would make them equal of—or superior to—men. It merely implied that men were important variables in the social evolution of women.

Islam offered the Malays a novel framework within which to view and assess the moral worth of women. In line with the egalitarian principles it sought to promote, Islam taught that women were equal to men. Malays were told that it was piety not gender which determined one’s membership in the Islamic community of believers (ummah). As such, women possessed the same rights and opportunities as men; they too could attain salvation and occupy a position in the sacred hierarchy provided they observed the Divine Law and the Five Pillars of Islam. One important implication of this particular teaching was that women were held responsible for their own fate in this world or next. Like men, women could acquire merit (pahala) if they rendered service (ibadah) to Allah or accumulate demerit (dosa) if they committed sinful acts. It was the balance between the merits and demerits she had accumulated in her lifetime that actually determined whether a woman went to heaven or hell—not the nature of the kinship ties she had with the male members of the community. Islam’s egalitarian outlook certainly had positive implications for the definition of status and potential

of women in society. However in pre-reformation years, Malay cultural consciousness was hardly affected by Islamic notion of equality of the sexes as by the religion’s conception of the genetic differences between men and women which formed part of Islamic gender ideology. In other words, Islam also encouraged its adherents to recognise and consider inherent dissimilarities between the sexes in organising their community life. Malays were told that women differed from men physically, emotionally and psychologically. They were weak and possessed a psychological constitution which made them emotional and less rational in dealing with life’s problems. Despite their potential, Malays were told that women were not without potential, however, in assigning them social roles Islam encouraged members of society to evaluate the moral and social worth of women in light of the differences mentioned earlier.

In short, Islam upheld two mutually contradictory views about women. On the one hand, the religion advocated ideas concerning the equality of the sexes; on the other, it stressed the obvious differences between them. Both messages induced a certain consciousness in the Malays which in turn influenced the structure of gender relations. In the early phase of Islamization until the end of the nineteenth century, even though the Islamic ideal of equality of the sexes was disseminated among the masses, it was neither elaborated upon nor translated into meaningful behavior patterns. In fact, Malays found it easier to absorb Islam’s other assertion regarding the innate biological differences between men and women and to use it to legitimize the current indigenous practice of subordinating the latter to the former. This was because the Islamic contention concerning the genetic differences between the sexes had a close affinity with prevailing beliefs and assumptions regarding women; it was instrumental in ensuring continuity rather than bringing about a sudden break with existing tradition which preferred that women be regarded as secondary to men.

In the pre-reformation period, a number of efforts were made which showed marked traces of Islamic influence and which were aimed at highlighting genetic differences as the basis for ranking women lower than men. Largely, these efforts took the form of myths and rituals. One example is the Islamic creation myth which tells the story of how Eve, otherwise known as Siti Hawa in Malay, was created from Adam’s or Nabi Adam’s rib. The popular assumption that women represented hawa nafsu i.e. one’s carnal interests or desires also served the same purpose. According to the Islamic world view hawa nafsu is compared to akal i.e. one’s reasoning faculty

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4. This myth helps negate women’s creative role.
was not only conceived of as an element within man that could hinder a Muslim from drawing close to the divine, but also as something negative. Even though ideas of purity and pollution were not as distinctive in Islamic teachings as they were in Hinduism,\(^6\) certain Islamic purification rites suggested that Islam too entertained similar beliefs.\(^7\) Evidence of this could be seen for instance in Quranic injunctions requiring women to perform ritual baths (mandi junub) after menstruation and childbirth; women in a so-called 'unclean' (kotor) state were prohibited from undertaking religious duties like praying, fasting, going to mosques and visiting graveyards sites. These rules implied two things. First Islamic notions of impurity, such as those derived from Hinduism, also revolved around the physiology of women; and secondly women, unlike men, were unable—without interruption—to fulfill certain religious duties which were then essential to the social, moral and spiritual well-being of the community. These ideas also helped reinforce the belief that women could not be relied upon to perform a wide variety of social roles, especially those which would have thrust them into the public limelight, such as leaders, opinion givers and religious functionaries. Prior to the acceptance of Islam, women had the option of attaining public distinction by assuming the role of traditional healer (bomoh).\(^8\) However, as Islam became more entrenched in Malay society, shamans and shamanistic practices became suspect and ceased to enjoy the respect of society members. This was because they tended to rely heavily on spirits and helped perpetuate beliefs that were at odds with orthodox Islamic teachings. Besides, Malays were more scornful of female traditional healers than male ones and Islam’s negative attitude towards shamanistic practices in general imposed further restrictions on women’s involvement in the public domain of Malay social life.

A close look at a literary genre imported from the Middle East called Hikayat and which was quite widespread in pre-reformation period further confirms the peripheral place of women in traditional society. Stories describing the birth and exploits of the Prophet Muhammad, for instance, mentioned women such as the Prophet’s wet nurse Halimahtun Saadiah, his first wife Khadijah and his youngest wife Aishah. However, what was attractive about these women were the qualities they exhibited,

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8. On the bomoh institution see Winstedt, R.O., Malay Magician Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982).
such as patience, devotion, faithfulness, trust and selflessness not their active participation in society at large. A similar moral underlies the story of Siti Zubaidah.\(^9\) Siti Zubaidah apparently represented a different category of women than the women mentioned earlier. The daughter of a local **ulama** and the wife of a Sultan, Siti Zubaidah took upon herself the responsibility to rescue her husband, Sultan Zainal Abidin, who was held captive by seven Chinese princesses. At first glance, we might think that the story was intended to dismiss the popular belief that women were physically weak, that they were equal to men. However, the story of Siti Zubaidah was narrated in such a manner that what was striking about the lady was not so much her feat, intelligence, wisdom and prowess but the feminine characteristics she displayed such as faithfulness, gentleness, beauty and sweetness. The fact that she made an effort to teach herself fighting skills, which in those days were meant only for men, and then ventured forth from her native village to execute a task again associated only with men, i.e. to rescue her husband from the torture chambers of his Chinese captors, was not properly assessed in terms of Islamic universal and egalitarian principles. Like various other stories which contained female protagonists, **Syaer Siti Zubaidah** also played on themes familiar to the local populace viz: the faithfulness and devotion of a wife towards her husband, which, in the final analysis, reinforced prevailing beliefs concerning the subordinate position of women vis-à-vis men. On the other hand, to lend continuity to the existing belief in the superiority of men there were stories which told of the adventures and miraculous deeds of Muslim warriors which, incidentally, enjoyed a much wider circulation. These stories included the war exploits of well-known warriors and strategists such as Abu Hanifah, Amir Hamzah, Saidina Ali, Khalid Ibn Walid, Hassan and Hussin among others.

The above discussion shows that, in the first phase of Islamization, Islam did little to alter gender relations in pre-modern Malay society. As stated earlier, one reason for this was the similarity between Islamic and indigenous conceptions regarding the innate differences between men and women. Although the notion carried different philosophical connotations in Islamic and pre-Islamic religious traditions, it had a wider appeal among the largely illiterate and religiously untutored Malay masses. Changes in people's perceptions of, and regard for women that might be attributed directly to Islam were indeed minimal. Although couched in different terms, the Malays' ambivalent attitude towards women persisted even after the spread of Islam to the peninsula. Women were looked down upon because they symbolised manifest

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animality. On the other hand, as mothers they were accorded a certain respect and thus, considered noble (mulia). The popular expression “syurga di bawah tapak kaki ibu” which means “paradise lies under mothers’ sole” reflects the esteem in which those women were held as who had assumed the social role of mothers in traditional Malay society. At the social level, women’s subordinate and inferior position could be seen in the socialization pattern of the Malays which proceeded in much the same way as it had in pre-Islamic times. As mentioned earlier, girls were trained to undertake household chores, help their mothers and female kinsmen with the cooking, look after their younger siblings, do the mending etc. They also participated in a wide range of economic activities such as padi planting, rice harvesting and petty trading. Although exposed to society at large, Malay girls were socialised into thinking and believing that their commitments were to the family. Furthermore, as in the past girls were taught that through marriage they could not only maximise these commitments but also safeguard their own morality and that of society as well.

Islah Islamiyah and Social Freedom for Women

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, there occurred in Malaysian history an important socio-cultural event which, to a certain extent, helped modify people’s perceptions and thinking about women. The event referred to here was a kind of religious reformation which was triggered by a deep concern among a number of members of the religious elite who were influenced by the ideas of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida who aimed to purify Islam of indigenous accretions and induce an awareness among members of the ummah of the negative implications—for society and its development—of blind obedience to religious authority (taklid buta). This reform movement was generally referred to as Gerakan Islah Islamiyah. Its promoters were called Kaum Muda or “the modernists” to distinguish them from the traditionalists who were known as Kaum Tua. In analysing the phenomenon, William Roff in his book “The Origins of Malay Nationalism” said,

“For the more purposive Kaum Muda, it (religious reform movement) meant an attempt to re-think Islam in terms of the demands made by the contemporary situation; to participate as it were in induced social change, the dynamics of which would be provided by a reformed Islamic Ideology. For only comparatively few, initially, did it mean an uncritical and holistic acceptance of all the West had to offer.” (1967: 76)

10. This term is the local rendering of the early twentieth-century religious reform movement.
Although the modernists concentrated a great deal of effort, in their reform program, on doctrinal and ritual issues, they also dealt with certain social issues like political power, corruption and the emancipation of women. The latter was discussed in relation to wider issues, such as improvements to the quality of religious instruction and the need to empathise with the west, which actually dominated the thinking of the reformists. In the 1920s, an attempt was made to re-examine the status and fate of women in Malay society. It took the form of two novels written by a well-known reformist—cum—novelist by the name of Sayyid Syeikh Al Hadi. The novels were Hikayat Faridah Hanum (translated as “The Story of Faridah Hanum”) and Puteri Nurulain (translated as “Princess Nurulain”) published in 1925 and 1926 respectively. Aside from dwelling on characteristics such as modesty and faithfulness—qualities that are expected of women—Sayyid Sheik Al Hadi also took the opportunity, in both novels, to stress the importance of formal education and greater social freedom for women. Another matter which he highlighted was divorce which indirectly indicates —albeit indirectly—that he had the welfare of women at heart. Sayyid Syeikh drew the attention of the public to the dangers inherent in a society in which divorce was a frequent occurrence—especially if the power to dissolve a marriage rested with the husband. He also criticised the ease with which estranged spouses could remarry through the intervention of the husband or Cina buta, an institution which to the writer had no basis in the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet. Sayyid Syeikh’s other works which addressed the issue of the emancipation of women were Alam Perempuan (translated as “A Woman’s World”) and Cerita-cerita Rokambul (translated as “Stories from Rokambul”). Except for Alam Perempuan, the other books were totally his own work. Alam Perempuan was actually a translation of Muhammad Abduh’s writing on the exegesis of the Quran and part of Kassim Amin Bey’s exposition on the emancipation of women.

11. Cina buta which literally means 'a blind Chinese' is a corrupt version of muhallil, the institution of intervening husband prescribed by Islam. According to Islamic law, a man who has divorced his wife three times or resorted to a three — talak divorce, can remarry his ex—wife provided she was married to and divorced by another man who in this case is regarded as the intervening husband. Islamic law also insists that the woman’s marriage to the muhallil must have been consummated. The Cina buta practice is considered to deviate from Islamic marriage rules in that the parties involved have a tacit agreement among themselves that the person playing the role of intervening husband should not have sexual intercourse with the woman and should divorce her after a day or two so she can remarry her former husband. See also Djamour, J., The Muslim Matrimonial Court in Singapore (London: The Athlone Press, 1966).

As indicated earlier, the issue of social freedom for women did not occupy a central place in the Islamic reform movement, which started in the early twentieth century. However, from the point of view of the religious modernists, the issue had to be raised because reformers were aware of at least one positive trait of western civilization which Malay society should be able to adopt: its liberal attitude towards the education of women. In pre-independence times, access to religious instruction throughout the country was through the pondok system. A pondok was a traditional religious school established by an ulama who assumed the role of principal teacher. However, although it was generally accepted that the acquisition of knowledge was the responsibility of every Muslim, it was much easier during that time for men to fulfil this religious obligation than it was for women. Hence religious schools were dominated by men. Other than members of the principal teacher's household, few women received religious education. Those who did, received only the rudiments of a religious education and as such were unable to pursue advanced studies in institutions of higher learning in the Middle East. Besides, the knowledge of Islam imparted to women was intended to help them maintain certain standards of morality so they could become responsible daughters, wives and mothers. Religious modernists, on the other hand, tried to change the situation by introducing the madrasah system. A madrasah was a modern religious school in the sense that it was modelled on secular schools and offered both religious and secular subjects, such as history, geography, mathematics etc. As part of their overall effort to help Malays empathise with western culture and society, including the westerners' interest in the education of women, a few of the modernists built religious schools in Singapore, Penang and some of the major towns in the Malay states especially for girls. When they were first established, these schools—called tarbiyah al islamiyah—managed to enroll adolescents above fifteen years of age.

Before proceeding any further, it is worthwhile to point out at this juncture that these religious modernists were not the only elements within the country concerned with the freedom of women. At the same time that ulama such as Sayyid Syeikh Al Hadi, Syeikh Mohammad Tahir Jalaluddin and Haji Abbas bin Mohammad Taha were busy campaigning for reforms to the religious education system in general and the construction of religious schools for young women in particular, British administrators and Christian missionary groups were also attempting to set up vernacular, English and missionary schools in what was then the Federation of Malaya. These secular institutions, like their religious counterparts, were intended for both boys and girls. Generally speaking, Malay parents preferred to send their daughters to the tarbiyah and vernacular schools than to missionary or English government schools. This was
because the latter institutions were associated with Christian elements. However, in late 1950s the number of Malay girls attending these schools increased tremendously. This development obviously reflected a change in the attitude of the public towards female education which would be impossible had it not been for the support of members of the religious elite, who found it compatible with current Islamic beliefs to sanction incentives undertaken by other individuals and groups aimed at upgrading the status of women as a whole. Thus, as education was made more and more accessible to the public at large, the modernists' campaign for the right of women to acquire an education served as a source of inspiration for other religious leaders to legitimize—in Islamic terms—greater enrollment of girls in schools and the inevitable changes this would bring in the status and role of women in society.

It is obvious from the above discussion that, in pre-independence times, religious schools for girls were dominant social forms embodying the Islamic notion of equality of the sexes. By encouraging girls to enroll in the tarbiyah, religious reformers gave due recognition to an element common to both sexes, namely 'intellect' (akal). This represented a radical departure from the established line of religious thought, which never associated women with intellectual endeavour. Aside from that, giving women the same opportunity as men to acquire knowledge meant that Malay women had one of the two choices thrust upon them: continue to be confined to the home or participate in the public sphere through such social roles as religious teachers (ustazah), reciters of the Quran (qariah) and junior officials in the religious bureaucracy. Even though schools served as social contexts within which Islamic egalitarian principles were actualised, the realities of Malay social life during the pre-independence period indicated that the new strand of thinking about women, which members of the Gerakan Islah Islamiyah helped promote, was not that widespread. In fact, even the reformers themselves could not resolve the apparent contradiction between social freedom for women and female subordination. Ulama, such as Sayyid Syeikh Al Hadi mentioned earlier, were keen to see women liberated but uncertain whether they should be regarded as the social equals. Although Malay society was beginning to accept women as part of the country's labor force, discrimination against them was still rampant and clearly evident in the field of job allocation. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, about 95 per cent of all gainfully employed Malay women served as teachers in vernacular and religious schools. On the other hand, the majority of male workers were employed as government officials, clerks, and administrators. As far as Malays were concerned, the teaching profession was regarded as eminently suitable for women because it represented an extension of the nourishing and nursing roles that women played in the home as mothers. Besides, this particular profession put a woman in a position
of authority vis-à-vis children rather than grown-ups. This, incidentally, was consistent with the prevailing assumption that women could only lead or dominate young children, not adults.

The propensity among the Malay masses to continue to regard women as subordinate and inferior to men, despite the modernists’ re-evaluation of their place in society, could also be attributed to the relatively small number of women who had taken up outside employment. Aside from that, the nature of their jobs was such that women were not empowered to make administrative or judicial decisions that would have an important bearing on society as a whole. Within the religious bureaucracy, for example, formulation of policy was in the hands of people such as the **mufti**, members of the Council of Religion, the Chief Kadi, the Head of the Department of Religious Affairs and chairmen of the various units within the department. Since it was generally held that women should not be leaders, especially in the religious realm, the above posts were reserved strictly for men. The practice of allocating positions to men, which gave them the power to decide on matters of importance applied not only to the religious bureaucracy but to all other government bodies as well. This discrimination against women was justified on the grounds that women were emotional, irrational and less objective. Proof that women indeed possess these undesirable qualities was sought in the Quran and in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (**hadith**). This served to disqualify women from holding public posts, thus strengthening existing beliefs regarding the inferiority of women.

It is a well-known fact that, the programmatic rationalization of Islam which characterized the trend towards religious change during the pre-independence period was motivated by a concern, among the religious modernists, to foster a greater sensitivity among the people with regard to the application of Islamic law (**syariah**). At the level of social organization, aside from constructing, improving and upgrading Islamic courts in the country, steps were also undertaken by the authorities to systematize Islamic law with regard to marriage, divorce, child maintenance support and other related matters. The establishment of Islamic legal and administrative infrastructures was an attempt at approximating the ideal of an egalitarian society and safeguarding the rights of women. Unfortunately, the religious authorities failed to make any corresponding efforts to seriously reflect upon the universal principles underlying that law, which might reduce discrimination against Malay women. Socialised into thinking that women were in constant need of male protection because of their physical weakness and helplessness, it was relatively easy for Malay men to interpret Islam’s positive attitude towards polygamy, for instance, as an affirmation of their superiority over women. Similar inferences could be made from the legal
provisions in the Syariah which required that a 'marriage guardian' (wali) give away the bride and that divorced women be given gifts, called mutaah, as a consolation for losing their virginity upon marriage. This perception of women as being lower than men in terms of moral and social status could also be attributed to the rather narrow, legalistic and literal translation of Islamic law by members of the religious élite themselves.

Dakwah and Malay Women in Contemporary Times

In Malaysia recent attempts at reviewing the state of Islam have taken the form of Islamic fundamentalist movements, better known as dakwah. Dakwah groups first emerged in the early 1970s. Today they include the Jemaah Tabligh, Al Arqam and Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia. Their aim is to "re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which is the Islamic human being, guided by the Quran and the Sunnah". Unlike their predecessors, the Kaum Muda, who were keen to standardise Islamic doctrine, dakwah groups are perturbed by the status of Islam and its relationship to society. Actually, these issues had been raised in the 1950s by a Malay-based opposition party, Parti Islam Setanah Melayu (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party) or PAS. On the scene, PAS, as well as the various dakwah groups dwell on them again because of the negative implications that problems such as uneven economic development, westernisation, the ethnic polarisation of Malays and Chinese in the major urban centers, rising unemployment and the migration of rural folk to the towns and cities have for Malay identity. From the point of view of the fundamentalists, the social and spiritual crises that Muslims are now facing in the country cannot be solved by merely recognising Islam as the official religion of Malaysia but by establishing an Islamic state or Darul Islam. To achieve this goal, fundamentalists believe that the public should be made more aware of certain universal principles implicit in Islamic teaching. In this respect, they call upon the authority to redefine the status of Islam as well as its relationship to the state.

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the impact this Islamic resurgence has had on the political situation in Malaysia. Of interest to us here is the manner in which dakwah groups and their sympathisers assess women's role in society and to what extent. Unlike their counterparts in pre-independence times,
members of the various dakwah organizations currently in the present existence era are confronted with a social scene in which the issue of social freedom for women is no longer a topic of popular debate. The breakdown of the traditional economy, the extension of educational facilities into the rural areas, and the institutionalization of democratic ideals through elections and the multi-party system correspond with an increase in the number of women being employed in various sectors in Malaysia: in agriculture, the civil service, the education system, the health service, the military as well as the manufacturing sector. In other words, present-day religious reformers do not have to argue in favor of or against the liberation of women. Instead, they will have to contend with the ramifications of a process which is still going on. Being learned in religious and secular matters themselves, leaders of the three dakwah groups mentioned earlier agree on one common issue, that is women’s right to an education. One issue over which they differ, however, is the extent of women’s involvement in national development. The Muslim Youth Organization of Malaysia, or ABIM, which regards education as the means by which the ideal social order can be established, adopts a liberal attitude towards women’s involvement in politics, economic planning, social work, the civil service and other spheres of activity. In fact, the group has 10,000 female members, 20 per cent of whom are comprised of teachers, university professors, government officials, clerks, secretaries, lawyers and the like. Jemaah Tabligh and Al Arqam adopt a stance that is diametrically opposite to ABIM. The former is virtually silent on the question of the emancipation of women. Given the fact that men monopolise all the proselytising activities of the group, it is not totally incorrect to infer that Jemaah Tabligh has a very conservative view of women and their potential. Compared to Jemaah Tabligh, Al Arqam is much more vocal with regard to women. Through its magazine Almukminah, published once a month, Al Arqam continuously socialises its female members into giving top priority to their traditional roles as wives, co-wives and mothers. The group also directs the attention of its members and the public towards the moral degradation that may befall the ummah if men and women are allowed to mix freely with one another. Hence, the need for segregation of the


15. Personal communication with Secretary of Helwa Secretariat of ABIM.
sexes. Furthermore, women are told of the rewards awaiting faithful wives and those who willingly enter into polygamous unions.

Although PAS, the Malay opposition party mentioned earlier, is not a *dakwah* organization, its views on the emancipation of women are worth considering because they are also Islam-based. The party strongly upholds the Islamic ideal of equality of the sexes but opposes what it considers to be a misconception on the part of westerners and non-Muslims alike, namely that Islam discriminates against women. PAS points out that the Islamic law of evidence, which insists that the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man, and Islamic marriage law, that condones polygamy, have been cited by non-believers as evidence that in an Islamic society women occupy a subordinate position. The party argues that the stipulations are justified on the grounds that women, by virtue of their genetic make-up, assume different roles in society than men. As such they have different rights, claims, and obligations to fulfill. Differences in the rights of men and women, as laid down by the Quran, should not be construed as discrimination against the fairer sex. PAS’ rather conservative view with regard to women is further reflected in the party’s simplistic assessment of contemporary social problems. Apart from putting the blame on the government, PAS attributes most of the country’s problems, such as the high divorce rate, the increase in juvenile delinquency and illicit homosexual (including lesbian) relations. The party claims that the country is beset with all these problems, primarily, because women have abandoned their traditional roles to work in offices, factories, schools and firms. To solve these problems women should give priority to the home; they should work only if—and when—necessary. In this way, PAS members believe, the chastity, as well as the moral standards, of society can be safeguarded.

Although *dakwah* groups hold different opinions with regard to women’s liberation, they share one thing in common; i.e. they have not made the phenomenon the central concern of their reform programs. In the case of *Al Arqam, Jemaah Tabligh* and PAS, the emancipation of women is examined in light of what they perceive as widespread moral decadence due to increased secularism, westernisation and urbanization. ABIM, on the other hand, steers clear of the issue of the emancipation of women. However, by supporting the involvement of professional women in the social and intellectual activities of the organization—and the dedication they have shown, ABIM does not view the phenomenon as being determined either to national development in general or the Islamic course in particular. In this respect, ABIM is similar to the early twentieth century religious reform movement. Furthermore, like its predecessor the *Kaum Muda*, ABIM is only able to approximate the Islamic ideal of equality of the sexes in symbolic rather than practical terms. By acknowledging, for instance,
women's right to pursue an education, participate in politics, and assume a post in the upper echelons of the civil service, ABIM lends legitimacy to women venturing into society at large. The realities of Malaysian social life, however, reveal that discrimination against women in the various professions is still rampant\(^\text{16}\) and it is not ABIM's main concern to remedy the situation.

**Conclusion**

The above discussion has shown that Islam contributes significantly towards defining and legitimising changes—if any—in the status and role of Malay women in society. Islamic teaching concerning women actually contains two conflicting messages. On the one hand, Islam asserts that women are different from men in terms of their emotional, psychological and biological make-up; but on the other, it teaches that women enjoy the same moral status as men in the Islamic moral community. Ever since the acceptance of Islam some five or six hundred years ago, the former rather than the latter message is much easier to be translated into action and may be relied upon to justify the secondary status of Malay women in society.

The liberation of women through education and employment opportunities poses a challenge to established norms. It also provides a chance for members of the religious elite to attempt to approximate the ideal of an egalitarian society that is central to Islamic thinking. However, the paper shows that neither Gerakah Islah Islamiyah nor the various *dakwah* groups ever consider making the issue of social freedom for women the basis for realizing social equality. In fact, religious reformers who are for the emancipation of women broach the subject just by chance while those who oppose it merely state an unwillingness to break with existing tradition.