

THE KARYAWAN

PROFESSIONALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

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Social Participation for Muslim Seniors



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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In this issue of *The Karyawan*, we delve into a crucial aspect of Singapore's ageing landscape, emphasising the need for increased social participation among our Muslim seniors. As our society ages, it is imperative to recognise the multifaceted benefits of social engagement for the well-being of our elderly.

In his article on *Page 10*, Ahmad Ubaidillah explores the profound impact of social participation on the physical, emotional, and mental health of seniors. With an ageing population and changing family structures, the responsibility for eldercare is shifting, necessitating a more robust network of community-based support. As shared by the Seniors Panel of AMP's 4th National Convention in 2022, filial piety, deeply ingrained in our culture, often intersects with religious beliefs, posing unique challenges for Muslim seniors and their caregivers.



The article underscores the importance of breaking down barriers to social participation, particularly for the Malay/Muslim community. Cultural and religious preferences shape seniors' choices in activities, necessitating a thoughtful and inclusive approach from government agencies and stakeholders. Collaboration with relevant Muslim community stakeholders, such as mosques and organisations, becomes crucial in crafting programmes that resonate with the religious identity of our seniors. The community's collective effort, empathy, and awareness are pivotal in ensuring the successful ageing of our Muslim seniors in Singapore.

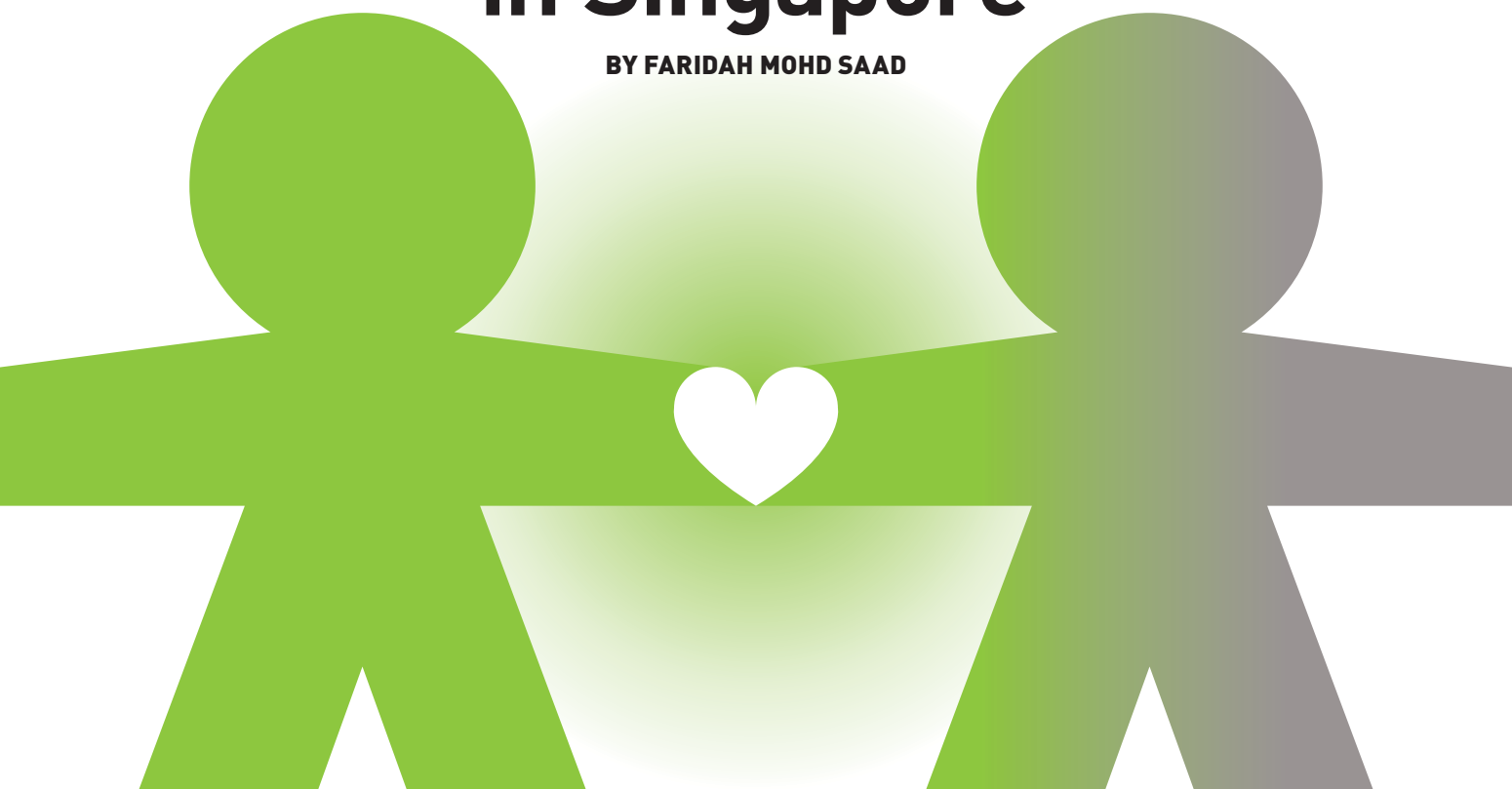
It is my hope that this issue encourages us to reflect on our societal responsibilities and urges us to actively contribute to the well-being of our elderly, fostering a community that cherishes and supports its seniors in their golden years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fathurrahman Dawoed'.

FATHURRAHMAN DAWOED
SUPERVISING EDITOR

From Passion to Action: The Transformative Power of Youth Volunteerism in Singapore

BY FARIDAH MOHD SAAD



INTRODUCTION

In 2020, psychologists Adam Waytz and Wilhelm Hofmann embarked on a study with a fundamental question at its core: Does focusing on oneself or others contribute more to happiness?

During the study, 263 American participants received instructions on their smartphone daily for 10 days, to perform one of three activities:

- **Moral Deeds:** One group was assigned to engage in moral deeds

such as giving to charity or helping someone else;

- **Moral Thoughts:** One group had to think “moral thoughts” such as thinking good things about someone else or hoping for someone else’s success;
- **Treat Yourself:** One group had to do something kind for themselves (such as relaxing or treating themselves to a nice meal).

Each night, participants filled out surveys of their happiness, life satisfaction, sense of purpose in life and how connected they felt to others.

The findings? The Moral Deeds Group reported higher scores on a range of well-being measures than the Moral Thoughts Group and both reported higher scores than the Treat Yourself Group. Those caring for others actively felt a greater purpose in life and a sense of control. They were also the only ones who felt less anger and social isolation.

The bottomline is that focusing more on service to others and less on yourself and your desires will make you happier and one of the most accessible ways to do so is to volunteer.

Volunteering, an act of giving without expecting financial gain, is a global movement involving 862.4 million people monthly, with Asia and the Pacific leading the way¹.

How does Singapore fit into this narrative? This article delves into the landscape of volunteerism in Singapore, focusing on youth engagement and the specific context of the Malay/Muslim community.

SINGAPORE'S VOLUNTEERISM TRAJECTORY

Singapore's volunteerism rate soared from 9% in 2000 to its highest of 35% in 2016, prompting the SG Cares movement's launch in 2017². In 2018, then-Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Development, Grace Fu, laid out an ambitious target to double the volunteerism rate to 70% in 5 years³.

The SG Cares movement, championed by the SG Cares Office and co-led by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) and the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), aimed to promote active volunteerism, ground-up efforts and everyday acts of care. The movement invested in three core areas – building structures for coordinated volunteerism, uplifting volunteer management capabilities and providing everyone with a convenient way to volunteer. SG Cares Volunteer Centres (VCs) were established in each town in Singapore to coordinate grassroots-level volunteering opportunities. The SG Cares mobile app and website were also launched to provide residents with a seamless way to seek opportunities to volunteer depending on their requirements (duration, location, causes, *etc.*).

However, despite significant efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted progress,

There is however one bright spark. Consistently outpacing national rates, school-age youths (15-24 years) have shown remarkable volunteerism participation, over 40% in 2018, encouraged by initiatives like Values in Action (VIA) and the Community Involvement Programme (CIP).

causing the volunteerism rate to dip to 22%, as reported in the Individual Giving Study 2021, conducted by NVPC.

YOUTH VOLUNTEERISM: A BRIGHT SPARK

There is, however, one bright spark. Consistently outpacing national rates, school-age youths (15-24 years) have shown remarkable volunteerism participation, over 40% in 2018, encouraged by initiatives like Values in Action (VIA) and the Community Involvement Programme (CIP).

Youth Corp Singapore (YCS)

Recognising the power and potential of youth, Youth Corps Singapore was launched in 2014 by the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth. Today, under the National Youth Council, YCS is mandated to empower and support youths aged 15 to 35 to ignite positive change in society through community service. It provides wide-ranging volunteering opportunities both locally (through partnerships with various charities and social service agencies) and overseas. Youths can volunteer for a variety of causes from befriending the elderly, eco-awareness, mentoring *etc.* In recent years, it has shifted its focus to supporting youth community leaders, building capabilities to kick-start their own ground-up movements and initiatives. Today, it boasts 32,000 members who have collectively served 1.2 million service hours (as of December 2020).

ALL-ROUND POSITIVE IMPACT

Volunteerism goes beyond altruism; it offers personal and societal benefits. Volunteers gain skills, form social connections and contribute to a more cohesive society. In a 2022 statement to CNA on International Volunteer Day celebrated on 5 December, Ms Charis Chan, director of global engagement for the Singapore Red Cross, emphasises the vital role of volunteers, noting that 80% of their programmes are run by dedicated volunteers⁴.

At the societal level, volunteering fosters social cohesion and strengthens the fabric of communities. Volunteers often play a crucial role in building bridges across diverse groups, promoting understanding and creating a sense of shared responsibility. In turn, we have a more resilient and connected society, reducing instances of social isolation.

Volunteerism is therefore a strategic investment for any government. It augments the government's efforts in

¹ United Nations Volunteers. [2022]. State of the World's Volunteerism Report: Building Equal and Inclusive Societies.

² The National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC). [2021]. *Individual Giving Study 2021*. <https://cityofgood.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NVPC-Individual-Giving-Study-2021-Report182.pdf>

³ Grace Leong. [2018, June 5]. *Volunteerism rate needs to be 70 per cent with ageing population: Grace Fu*. The Straits Times. <https://str.sg/oYi2>

⁴ Fabian Koh. [2022, December 5]. *Rising volunteerism in Singapore boosted by youth action, new outreach initiatives*. Channel News Asia <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/volunteerism-singapore-more-vocal-youth-new-outreach-initiatives-covid-19-pandemic-red-cross-3122891>

Youths, in their self-discovery phase, are exploring causes and experiences that matter to them. Their evolving priorities and interests make it challenging to maintain a consistent level of engagement. The volunteer experience might not always align with their expectations, leading to a dissonance that can be hard to address. Organisations must be attuned to the dynamic nature of youths' interests, offering varied and flexible opportunities that cater to their changing motivations.

addressing social issues and community needs. By harnessing the power of volunteers, governments can extend the reach and impact of their programmes, maximising resources and creating a more comprehensive support system.

CHALLENGES OF YOUTH VOLUNTEERISM

While the youth demographic stands as a beacon in Singapore's volunteerism landscape, it is not without its challenges. Addressing these hurdles is crucial for ensuring sustained engagement and maximising the positive impact of youth volunteerism.

- **Limited Time Availability:** One of the primary challenges in attracting and retaining youth volunteers is their constrained time availability. Juggling academic responsibilities, co-curricular activities (CCAs) and sometimes part-time jobs, youths find themselves with limited time to engage in volunteer work. The competing commitments often result in deprioritising volunteer work. Organisations aiming to harness the enthusiasm of young volunteers must recognise and adapt to their busy schedules.
- **Lack of Experience and Skills:** Youth volunteers may lack the experience and skills required for certain types of volunteer work. Enthusiasm to contribute may be present, but the realisation that specific roles demand substantial training can be a deterrent. For instance, a young volunteer eager to counsel victims of abuse might discover the need for extensive training to effectively engage in meaningful interactions. While not insurmountable, addressing this challenge requires additional time and commitment from youths to acquire the necessary skill sets.
- **Motivation and Commitment:** Youths, in their self-discovery phase, are exploring causes and experiences that matter to them. Their evolving priorities and interests make it challenging to maintain a consistent

level of engagement. The volunteer experience might not always align with their expectations, leading to a dissonance that can be hard to address. Organisations must be attuned to the dynamic nature of youths' interests, offering varied and flexible opportunities that cater to their changing motivations.

LOOKING AHEAD: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The above challenges are universal, but organisations working with youth volunteers could proactively address them. Several key trends can be embraced to bolster youth volunteering and overcome these challenges.

- **Digital Engagement:** Recognising that today's youths are digital natives, organisations should leverage social media, online platforms and digital tools to engage and communicate with young volunteers. While the essence of volunteering is most rewarding in physical settings, non-core aspects of the experience such as recruitment, onboarding and certain training components can be moved online for convenience.
- **Micro-volunteering:** Youths are drawn to organisations that offer flexibility. The rise of micro-volunteering, where individuals can contribute by completing specific tasks in a short amount of time, aligns with the preferences of youths. Organisations should resize volunteering opportunities to attract both 'drop-in' types and those with a higher bandwidth to take on more significant roles on a project basis.
- **Skills-Based Volunteering:** Acknowledging that many youth volunteers seek opportunities to develop specific skills, organisations can design roles that align with these interests. Offering meaningful experiences that contribute to personal and professional growth is key. The trend of skills-based volunteering, mirroring the pro-bono legal advice circuit, allows volunteers

to apply and develop specific skills, contributing to both personal and societal advancement.

- **Impact Measurement and Transparency:** Youth volunteers value transparency regarding the impact of their contributions. Organisations should communicate the outcomes of volunteer efforts, demonstrating how individual contributions contribute to the overall mission. Treating volunteers as stakeholders and sharing data points on the impact adds to their sense of belonging and motivation.
- **Training and Development Opportunities:** To retain youth volunteers, organisations must offer training and skill development opportunities. Recognising that skills acquisition was a motivating factor for their initial volunteering, providing in-house programmes or tapping on external resources like NCSS or YCS can dedicate development opportunities.
- **Supporting Ground-Up Movements:** Resourcing ground-up initiatives where youths come together informally to address causes they care about is crucial. These create a culture of self-reliance and empowerment especially among youths who are deeply invested or impacted by specific issues.

In navigating these challenges and embracing emerging trends, organisations can pave the way for a more resilient and vibrant culture of youth volunteerism in Singapore.

YOUTH VOLUNTEERISM IN THE MALAY/MUSLIM COMMUNITY

The spirit of volunteerism and community service i.e. *"bergotong-royong"* is very much alive and well in the Malay/Muslim (MM) community. MM youth volunteers augment the lean staffing of MM organisations (MMO), further constrained by funding and reach. Education, social services, mental health have emerged as key causes MM youths gravitate toward,

joining either formal organisations or starting their own ground-up movements to render support.

How have some of the MMOs adapted to the challenges and future trends of attracting and retaining youth volunteers? *Leveraging digital tools and data for impact: MENDAKI Club*

MENDAKI Club (MClub), a 100% volunteer-led youth organisation founded in 2001, has become a household name offering mentorship and community support to youths. Affiliated to the community self-help group, Yayasan MENDAKI, MClub relies on its tribe of several hundred youth volunteers to run mentoring programmes for secondary school and tertiary students, organise career conversations, run a community leadership programme and most recently, launch a support network for young MM women.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, MClub invested heavily in its digital infrastructure and the use of digital tools to manage its expanding operations. It onboarded onto Salesforce to manage its volunteer management system because Excel sheets had run out of utility and were not sustainable with a database of ~15,000 members and participants to manage. Investing in a reliable volunteer management system enabled MClub to have a 360-degree view of all its touchpoints from volunteers to participants and is a critical tool for succession planning. Recruitment of mentors and project members is also done virtually with the use of auto-scheduling apps and internally developed algorithms that match mentors and mentees.

MClub also incorporated data in its decision-making through tracking key metrics, feedback surveys and focus group sessions. The volunteers enthusiastically looked forward to the Annual General Meeting's Year-in-Review presentation of MClub's impact the preceding year as a concrete measure of their contribution to the community and a source of motivation.

Combining Grounds-Up and Skills-Based Volunteering: Malay Muslims in Tech (MMIT)

Initiated in March 2022, Malay Muslims in Tech (MMIT) was founded by a group of tech professionals who share the same passion – educating and inspiring MM youths to pursue careers in the tech industry. The professionals hold varying roles in the tech sector and work for some of the largest digital giants locally and globally. Today, the network has grown to 400+ members. The ground-up initiative not only runs community engagement events for youths e.g. hackathons to career talks but is also active as a collective voice on critical community issues.

CONCLUSION

As youth volunteerism continues to evolve, these examples in the MM community illustrate how adaptation and innovation are essential for sustaining and enhancing the impact of volunteer efforts.

In conclusion, youth volunteerism in Singapore is a powerful force for positive change. Every youth volunteer has the potential to grow into a socially conscious leader. Understanding its challenges and embracing emerging trends will ensure a thriving culture of volunteerism that not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the fabric of Singapore society. ■

Faridah Saad was president of MENDAKI Club from 2020-2023 and has spent more than a decade supporting youth development causes within the Malay/Muslim community. She is currently a member of the 17th National Youth Council focusing on strengthening Singapore's youth connections with ASEAN and the world.

Generational Shifts in Unpaid Care Work

BY WANI WARDINA



Social reproduction goes beyond the traditional conception of labour as being solely limited to the creation of goods. It involves the process by which capitalist societies maintain and reproduce the conditions that are necessary for the capitalist system to continue functioning. Originally proposed by Karl Marx, this idea contests the limited perspective that only acknowledges market-productive labour (paid work) as real “work” and broadens the definition of labour to include the familial, communal, and societal efforts that allow people to join the force.¹ Theorists argue that the different processes required to maintain a society are not separate from productive labour but are crucial for the overall functioning of the capitalist system. In other words, the production of goods and the sustenance of individuals are interconnected components of capitalism that mutually reinforce each other. This includes performing unpaid care work within families.

Marxist analysis, while focusing on class exploitation, overlooked the specific gendered dimensions of labour.² Feminist theory extends this perspective by highlighting how unpaid labour is exploited and is often intertwined with gender dynamics. It shows how capitalism relies on and perpetuates women’s unequal burden of unpaid care work, which enables other forms of labour to function. This labour, otherwise known as unpaid care work, comprises caring for children, preparing meals, and maintaining cleanliness within the home. Women’s dedication to care work may hinder their participation in paid employment or hinder their opportunities for career advancement, impacting their financial independence as well as leading to a concentration in lower-paid and less stable jobs. In addition, feminist theorists examine how general government and public policies contribute to the perpetuation of gender hierarchies. Women are disproportionately impacted by limited accessible and reliable childcare, maternity leave, and carer assistance.

The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, primarily borne by women, limits their availability to participate fully in the formal workforce. Women’s capacity to engage in paid employment is limited as they devote more time to caregiving and domestic responsibilities, resulting in lower workforce participation rates and less prospects for professional growth. This reduces their earning potential and economic independence, contributing to the gender pay gap and maintaining existing disparities.

This general lack of care systems emphasises women’s obligation to perform unpaid care work and restricts their ability to advance economically. The concept of social reproduction, thus, stresses the indispensable role of care work in sustaining the labour force beyond mere economic transactions.

Disparities in unpaid care work contribute to inequalities in paid work through time allocation, which refers to the distribution and allocation of time to various tasks, or responsibilities in an individual’s daily life. The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, primarily borne by women, limits their availability to participate fully in the formal workforce.³ Women’s capacity to engage in paid employment is limited as they devote more time to caregiving and domestic responsibilities, resulting in lower workforce participation rates and less prospects for professional growth. This reduces their earning

potential and economic independence, contributing to the gender pay gap and maintaining existing disparities. Sadly, many of these women are more susceptible to abusive relationships. Their ability to make independent decisions about their lives and professions are limited as a result of having to rely on male partners or family members for financial support.

Additionally, a growing number of households are led by women who are responsible for both earning an income and providing care. This places a considerable burden on women’s time and energy as they are forced to juggle numerous obligations. Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *The Second Shift* reveals that when unpaid care work is combined with time spent in paid employment, women’s overall workload is significantly greater than that of men – “Most women work one shift at the office... and a “second shift” at home.”⁴ This also brings us to

¹ Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Mapping Social Reproduction Theory) (Pluto Press, 2017), 2.

² Silvia Federici, “Marx and Feminism”, *Marx @ 200: Debating Capitalism & Perspectives for the Future of Radical Theory* Vol 16, No. 2 (2018), 470, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v16i2.1004>.

³ Esquivel, V. “What is a transformative approach to care, and why do we need it?”, *Gender & Development* Vol. 22, No. 3 (2014): 424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.963303>.

Unpaid care work is still prevalent within the Malay-Muslim community, with women mostly regarded as the primary caretakers. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) clearly illustrates this — the Malay LFPR has consistently trailed other ethnic groups, reflecting a disparity that extends beyond race. Historically, many Malay women were absent from the workforce, but positive changes have emerged in recent years, indicating a rising trend in labour force participation. Nevertheless, this progress is juxtaposed with persistent challenges, as unemployment rates among Malays fluctuate, with rates notably higher than the general population, particularly for women.

the concept of “feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation” which is a phenomenon where women, especially those with young children, are shouldering an increasingly disproportionate burden of meeting household needs even when fathers are present in the household.⁵ It stems from historical precedents where women’s primary role was within the domestic sphere, while men’s contributions were largely confined to the public and economic realms.

Unpaid care work is still prevalent within the Malay-Muslim community, with women mostly regarded as the primary caretakers. The Labour Force

Participation Rate (LFPR) clearly illustrates this — the Malay LFPR has consistently trailed other ethnic groups, reflecting a disparity that extends beyond race. Historically, many Malay women were absent from the workforce, but positive changes have emerged in recent years, indicating a rising trend in labour force participation. Nevertheless, this progress is juxtaposed with persistent challenges, as unemployment rates among Malays fluctuate, with rates notably higher than the general population, particularly for women.⁶

There is, however, a generational shift in attitudes towards unpaid care work within the community as younger

generations may approach these responsibilities with different perspectives. One vital aspect of this transformation is the expanded educational horizons available to the younger cohort. With greater access to education, Malay-Muslim women have the potential to reevaluate their roles within the family structure. The pursuit of higher education equips them with skills and knowledge that may reshape their perceptions of career aspirations and familial duties. As educational opportunities become more accessible, they play a fundamental role in redefining the traditional roles associated with unpaid care work. Along with an increasing female workforce participation, this traditional division of labour prompts a reassessment of familial roles and necessitates pragmatic adaptations to address the changing needs of Malay-Muslim households here.

A common practice in Singapore demonstrates this. Many dual-income families engage domestic helpers, often from countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar, to help with various domestic tasks. Cooking, cleaning, and child and senior care are among the obligations covered by these tasks. Domestic helpers essentially become an integral part of the household, playing an important role in enabling families to manage their unpaid care work more efficiently. Hiring domestic helpers can have both beneficial and negative consequences for women’s participation in the formal workforce. It can relieve working mothers of the stress of unpaid care work, allowing them to devote more time and attention to their jobs, perhaps contributing to increased workforce participation rates for women who have access to domestic help. However, the hiring of domestic helpers can also reinforce traditional gender norms and divisions of labour. While women may benefit from having additional support with household and caregiving tasks, this practice can inadvertently perpetuate the idea that such responsibilities are solely the

⁵ Hochschild, A.R. and Machung, A. *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (Penguin, 2012).

⁶ Razavi, S. “Rethinking Care in a Development Context: An Introduction”, *Development and Change* Vol. 42, No. 4 (2011), 875, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2011.01722.x>.

⁶ Association of Muslim Professionals, *Demographic Study on Singapore Malays* (Singapore, 2017), 198. https://www.amp.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/12-Section-9_Demographic-Study.pdf.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has also witnessed the implementation of hybrid arrangements in some workplaces, which combine elements of remote and on-site work. It has proven instrumental in accommodating caregiving responsibilities. This increased acceptance of remote work as a viable and productive option has made the burdens associated with unpaid care work become more manageable. Hence, the logical next step is for more workplaces to adopt this hybrid arrangement, fostering a work environment that embraces flexibility and supports the various needs of the modern workforce.

domain of women. This can influence societal perceptions and expectations, further entrenching the notion that women are primarily responsible for unpaid care work. Additionally, the ability to hire domestic helpers is often linked with socioeconomic status. Affluent households are more likely to have the financial means to employ domestic helpers, while lower-income households may not have the same option. This creates income-based disparities in access to support for unpaid care work, potentially exacerbating inequalities in paid labour opportunities.

Thus, it is imperative for the community to advocate for workplace policies that facilitate a harmonious integration of these spheres. Employers within the community can significantly impact this effort by endorsing formal policies,

such as flexible working hours and parental leave, signalling a commitment to the holistic well-being of their workforce. Introducing flexible working hours is crucial for adapting to the diverse family structures prominent in the community. This approach acknowledges that the conventional 9-to-5 model may not cater to the subtle requirements of employees, especially those handling caregiving responsibilities. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has also witnessed the implementation of hybrid arrangements in some workplaces, which combine elements of remote and on-site work. It has proven instrumental in accommodating caregiving responsibilities. This increased acceptance of remote work as a viable and productive option has made the burdens associated with unpaid care work become more manageable.

Hence, the logical next step is for more workplaces to adopt this hybrid arrangement, fostering a work environment that embraces flexibility and supports the various needs of the modern workforce.

By examining the relationship between social reproduction, unpaid care work, and disparities in paid labour we can see that these elements are revealed to be closely linked and profoundly established within society systems. Social reproduction sheds light on the hidden forces that shape our communities by encompassing the processes that sustain societies and perpetuate inequality. There is an emphasis on the economic factors that maintain inequality between labour and capital. On the other hand, it has been discovered that patriarchal norms and gendered expectations impact women's roles, limiting their employment options. Unpaid care work, mostly performed by women, acts as the basic glue that keeps households running, yet it is frequently devalued, contributing to gender discrepancies in paid work. Ignoring the importance of care work jeopardises the stability and sustainability of economies, as it directly impacts the physical and emotional well-being of workers. This calls for a re-evaluation of societal values and policies to ensure that this labour is redistributed equitably. ■

Wani Wardina is a second-year undergraduate at the Australian National University, undertaking a double degree in Public Policy and Political Science. Beyond the realm of academia, she brings a vibrant mix of interests, including a love for cats and a penchant for video games.

Social Participation for Muslim Seniors

BY AHMAD UBAIDILLAH MOHAMED KHAIR



SENIORS HEALTHCARE LANDSCAPE

In the present context, the growing concern over Singapore's ageing population has prompted the government and relevant stakeholders to devise effective strategies for promoting successful ageing among Singaporeans. Successful ageing is characterised by maintenance of high levels of physical, psychological, and social functioning in old age without significant disease. To achieve this, the government has emphasised several important factors for successful ageing in Singapore, including personal responsibility, self-reliance, and fostering strong family and social relations.¹

However, as the population ages and the number of elderly citizens increases, the demand for alternative care sources has grown. Community-based care for seniors has gained prominence, exemplified by the Ministry of Health's 2009 launch of the Agency for Integrated Care to enhance and integrate the Long-Term Care (LTC) sector. We have also seen the establishment of the Community Network for Seniors (CNS), an initiative by government agencies and community partners to bring "ABC" – Active Ageing, Befriending, and Care and Support – to help seniors age gracefully. This approach aligns with the "Many Helping Hands" philosophy, highlighting the collaborative involvement of the government, community, and family in delivering community-based services.

Presently, a range of community-based services, such as home nursing services, senior citizens' clubs, and day care centres, are available to meet the needs of the elderly. Yet, with caregiving durations extending due to longer life spans, caregivers face heightened financial and emotional burdens. Consequently, more adult children of elderly parents are turning to eldercare providers for assistance. Caregivers are also grappling with the stigma associated with seeking external help, rooted in Singapore's tradition of filial piety, which places high

While physical health often takes centre stage in discourses on ageing, the impact of social engagement on the mental well-being of seniors is equally substantial. The importance of social participation for seniors cannot be overstated. It is a cornerstone of holistic well-being, impacting mental acuity, emotional resilience, physical health, and overall quality of life.

value on family involvement in caring for older relatives.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION FOR SENIORS

In recent years, there has been an increase in awareness of the importance of social participation and the positive effects it brings for seniors. The lack of it and the potential risks it brings have also been highlighted.² While physical health often takes centre stage in discourses on ageing, the impact of social engagement on the mental well-being of seniors is

equally substantial. The importance of social participation for seniors cannot be overstated. It is a cornerstone of holistic well-being, impacting mental acuity, emotional resilience, physical health, and overall quality of life.

One benefit of social participation is that it acts as a cognitive output for seniors, stimulating mental faculties and promoting mental agility. Engaging in conversations, social participation, and maintaining relationships are activities that challenge the brain, helping them to stave off cognitive decline. Studies consistently show that seniors who remain socially active are less likely to experience memory loss and cognitive impairment, fostering a sharper and more resilient mind well into old age.³

The emotional well-being of seniors is intricately linked to their social connections as well. Loneliness and social isolation can have detrimental effects on mental health, leading to feelings of depression and anxiety. Regular social interactions provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for seniors to share experiences and express themselves. Strong social networks act as a buffer against the emotional challenges that can arise in later life, contributing to a more positive outlook and emotional resilience.

Social participation also plays a crucial role in maintaining physical health.⁴ Engaging in social activities often involves movement and exercise, contributing to overall physical fitness. Whether through group exercises, outdoor activities, or even dancing, seniors who actively participate in social interactions are more likely to maintain mobility, flexibility, and cardiovascular health.

Social engagement also promotes healthier lifestyle choices, as seniors are encouraged to stay active and make mindful decisions about their well-being. The importance of social participation

¹ The Ministerial Committee on Ageing. (2023). Living Life to the Fullest 2023 Action Plan for Successful Ageing. <https://www.moh.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/action-plan/2023-action-plan.pdf>

² See Mélanie Levasseur, Lucie Richard, Lise Gauvin, Émilie Raymond, 'Inventory and analysis of definitions of social participation found in the aging literature: Proposed taxonomy of social activities,' *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 71, Issue 12, 2010, Pages 2141-2149. See also Kathryn Dawson-Townsend, 'Social participation patterns and their associations with health and well-being for older adults,' *SMM - Population Health*, Volume 8, 2019

³ James, B. D., Wilson, R. S., Barnes, L. L., & Bennett, D. A. (2011). Late-life social activity and cognitive decline in old age. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* - JINS, 17(6), 998-1005.

⁴ Dehi Aroogh, M., & Mohammadi Shahboulaghi, F. (2020). Social Participation of Older Adults: A Concept Analysis. *International journal of community-based nursing and midwifery*, 8(1), 55-72. <https://doi.org/10.30476/IJCBNM.2019.82222.1055>

In developing social participation programmes for seniors, one main factor that should be considered is the agency of seniors — meaning their preferences for the type of programmes that align with their interests. It is only natural that their agency is shaped by various aspects of their identity, be it gender, race, or religion. It is also important to remember that in the context of social participation, there are factors that shape the preferences of seniors in the type of activities they will engage in. This is particularly relevant for government agencies and stakeholders as they organise events and programmes for seniors.

extends to its role in reducing the risk of chronic conditions prevalent in older age. Studies suggest that socially active seniors are at a lower risk of developing conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, and certain types of dementia.⁵ The positive impact on physical and mental health translates into a reduced likelihood of chronic illnesses, contributing to a higher quality of life for seniors.

BARRIERS FOR SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Despite the current emphasis on the importance and benefits of social participation for seniors, there is much more that can be improved on this front. One of the barriers for this might be due to the emphasis on family as the

primary support network of seniors.⁶ Despite efforts to enhance healthcare affordability and accessibility, the state government continues to view the family as the primary caregiver for older adults. This expectation aligns with the deep-rooted tradition of filial piety in Asian societies, emphasising that children should directly care for their parents in old age. This concept is reinforced by the Maintenance of Parents Act, enabling Singaporean residents aged 60 and older to seek a court order against their capable children who fail to provide support.⁷

In the context of the Muslim community, on top of the social and cultural expectations, filial piety is intertwined with religious belief, as it is the moral

obligation of a child to oversee the welfare and well-being of their parents in their old age.⁸ This particular concept, called *Birr-ul Walidayn*, is central to Islamic teachings. This culture and practice of filial piety has an impact upon the social participation of seniors as their exposure and activities are restricted and dependent upon their family members whose responsibilities extend beyond caring for their elders, such as professional obligations and caring for young children. Caregivers might not have the resources to engage their elders in social programmes conducted by organisations, or perhaps they might not see its benefits. For this reason, there is more that can be improved regarding the awareness and knowledge of caregivers about programmes for seniors, and also the ability to reach out to these families.

Granted, notions of filial piety evolve as contexts change, which are leading to changing trends and practices in eldercare. One of the factors for this is the changing socio-economic factors among Singaporean families, causing a decline in co-residence among adult children and their elderly parents. Data have shown that the number of elderlies living independently has risen in recent years. The number of residents aged 65 and above who live alone in Singapore has risen from 58,000 in 2018 to 79,000 in 2022.⁹ In this context, better outreach is needed to attract seniors' attendance in social participation programmes.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION FOR MALAY/MUSLIM SENIORS

In developing social participation programmes for seniors, one main factor that should be considered is the agency of seniors — meaning their preferences for the type of programmes that align with their interests. It is only natural that their agency is shaped by various aspects of their identity, be it gender, race, or religion. It is also important to remember that in the context of social participation,

⁵ Sommerlad, A., Kivimäki, M., Larson, E.B. et al. Social participation and risk of developing dementia. *Nat Aging* 3, 532–545 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43587-023-00387-0>. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education; Health and Medicine Division; Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences; Board on Health Sciences Policy; Committee on the Health and Medical Dimensions of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults. (2020). *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. National Academies Press (US).

⁶ Shannon Ang, Social Participation and Mortality Among Older Adults in Singapore: Does Ethnicity Explain Gender Differences?, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, Volume 73, Issue 8, November 2018, Pages 1470–1479, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbw078>

⁷ Ministry of Social and Family Development. Maintenance of Parents Act. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/what-we-do/maintenance-of-parents/about/about-maintenance-of-parents-act>

⁸ Sayilgan S. Aging, Loneliness, and Filial Piety. In: *God, Evil, and Suffering in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2023:97–111. doi:10.1017/9781009377294.008

⁹ Ministry of Health. (2023, May 8). News Highlights Seniors Staying Alone. <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/seniors-staying-alone>

there are factors that shape the preferences of seniors in the type of activities they will engage in. This is particularly relevant for government agencies and stakeholders as they organise events and programmes for seniors.

While Singapore is a plural society with various ethnicities and religions, it must be acknowledged that different communities have varied preferences when it comes to social participation, especially in the context of seniors who have been shaped by their cultural and religious upbringing. Studies have shown that race, gender, and religion are deciding factors for the social participation of seniors.

For example, a study showed that for Malay and Indian seniors, cultural and religious activities hold particular importance. As a result, social interactions with family through celebrating cultural and religious activities occurred more frequently as compared to Chinese seniors.¹⁰ In terms of ethnicity, Malay seniors are less likely to go out to eat or attend an event organised by their Residents' Committee or other grassroots initiatives, but were more likely to attend a religious service, compared with Chinese and Indian older adults. The opposite pattern was found for older adults of Chinese ethnicity.¹¹ Studies have also shown how gender leads to differences in participation trends; Chinese men are less likely to attend religious services and do not report different rates of participation in sports compared with women. In contrast, Malay and Indian men were more likely than Malay and Indian women to engage in both sports and religious services.¹² These studies are important as they reflect the preferences of different groups of seniors. At the same time, they also indicate the centrality of the Malay seniors' religious identities.

It is important to note that in the Senior Panel of AMP's 4th National Convention

held in 2022, one of the main take aways is the centrality of religious identity among Muslim seniors. The findings showed that the participants opined that the caregiving system does not meet the needs and desires of Muslim seniors. This understanding can be extended towards the type of social participation programmes offered for them. In the current context, while it is important to strike a balance between attracting seniors while ensuring that it remains inclusive and open for all, the discourse has shown that the religious identity of Malay/Muslim seniors must be taken into consideration for the current caregiving system to attract Muslim seniors to their social participation programmes.

One of the ways this can be done is through collaboration with relevant stakeholders from the Muslim community, be it mosques or social service organisations. Mosques have historically played an active role in supporting Muslim seniors by raising health awareness and organising various programmes and activities. There are also various organisations such as Jamiyah, Pertapis, and Muhammadiyah Association that have long established elder care centres or services. Nevertheless, what we can observe now is the need to improve resources within the Muslim community to conduct consistent social participation programmes for seniors. This can be done both internally through communal efforts and initiatives, or externally through collaborations with relevant stakeholders.

The lack of Muslim-centric senior homes and professional senior caregivers that are culturally and religiously sensitive to Muslim seniors' needs are issues that were highlighted during the AMP's 4th National Convention too. With an ageing population, the community must work hand in hand to supplement the efforts and resources of the state. However, these efforts should not be

done at the expense of social integration. To ensure integration among seniors of different backgrounds, it is apt for stakeholders to find a balance between programmes that are Muslim-oriented and open for all. For example, this would mean utilising inclusive spaces and universally appreciated activities such as arts and sports.

CONCLUSION

The evolving context of Singapore means that there will be an upward trend in seniors living separately from their children. This should not be seen as a lack of filial piety, but a natural change brought upon by socio-economic factors. With the family no longer serving as the primary support network for seniors, there is a heightened need for enhanced external resources to ensure successful aging. With increasing numbers of seniors suffering from loneliness, it is also imperative that the community supplements policies and state-initiatives with our own efforts to socially engage Malay-Muslim seniors in Singapore, which can be done through existing Muslim institutions and organisations. This is only possible when the community inculcates strong empathy and awareness for the marginalised members of our society. ■

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¹⁰ Su Aw, Gerald Koh, Yeon Ju Oh, Mee Lian Wong, Hubertus J.M. Vrijhoef, Susana Concorde Harding, Mary Ann B. Geronimo, Cecilia Yoon Fong Lai, Zoe J.L. Hildon, Explaining the continuum of social participation among older adults in Singapore: from 'closed doors' to active ageing in multi-ethnic community settings, *Journal of Aging Studies*, Volume 42, 2017, Pages 46-55, ISSN 0890-4065, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2017.07.002>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shannon Ang, Social Participation and Mortality Among Older Adults in Singapore: Does Ethnicity Explain Gender Differences?, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, Volume 73, Issue 8, November 2018, Pages 1470-1479, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbw078>

The Importance of Activism Among Youths in Singapore

BY ALYA MAISARAH ANWAR



7 October 2023: a new date that has become significant in our human history.

It is also the day that marked the start of many social media posts and reposts with hashtags such as #freepalestine and #fromrivertothesea widely used not only by content creators but also by our family and friends.

Following the announcement of the prohibition of public gatherings on the Israel-Palestine issue amid public safety concerns, local activists in Singapore began leveraging online platforms to express support for the Palestinian cause¹, with most of them being Gen Zs. As those from Generation Z continue to dominate in terms of time spent on social media, youth activism has now taken on a new platform – social media – above the usual or traditional activism such as demonstrations, protests and petitions.

So, why is this important? Let's break it down.

WHAT IS YOUTH ACTIVISM?

If you were to Google the meaning of the words 'youth' and 'activism', you would find that youths are those between the ages of 15 and 24, while activism is the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.

In other words, youth activism is how the older population of Gen Z, also known as Zoomers today, voice their opinions and passion by participating in social and political issues. Today's youth are more outspoken than ever, taking a stance on significant issues and striving to ensure a better future for the upcoming generations. The influence of younger generations is contributing to essential shifts in perspectives regarding humanity and the environment. Youths have the potential and vision to make a difference today, which can lead to substantial social impact and shape a positive direction for society².

Youth activism includes movements around climate change, gender equality, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights and more. One example of a more well-known youth activist would be Greta Thunberg, who held her first "School Strike for Climate" at the age of 15, outside the Swedish parliament. Her protests received extensive media coverage, and hundreds of thousands of young individuals worldwide participated in the *Fridays For Future* strikes she initiated. She has not only questioned adults and world leaders for their lack of action in combating the climate crisis but also inspired fellow young individuals to engage with and advocate for causes that resonate with their passions online. Many commentators and government organisations call this "the Greta effect"³.

YOUTH ACTIVISM IN SINGAPORE

With Singapore being a tiny country, many youths may feel disheartened by the fact that their voices may go unheard and their efforts wasted. This may be due to the lack of resources and public spaces for youths to voice out their stand. However, there have been many cases lately where youth activism has proven effective in Singapore. In the past decade, there has been a noticeable increase in youths voicing their concerns, especially during the pandemic. Despite the upheaval caused by the pandemic in our daily lives, numerous youths have exhibited commendable compassion, determination, and a strong sense of community love.

Let's bring it back to the topic of Palestine and how Singaporean youths have shown their activism towards that cause.

As mentioned, more Singaporean youths are utilising social media extensively to discuss the Palestine issue or as some have called it, a genocide, which according to the United Nations, constitutes a proven intent on the part of perpetrators to physically destroy a national, ethnical, racial or religious group⁴. Singaporean youths are actively participating in

conversations, sharing diverse perspectives, and using various social media platforms to raise awareness about the ongoing situation in Palestine. One of the ways they have been doing so is through reposting on their social media platforms. Sharing posts related to this topic effectively increases the reach within our community. Some youths have even taken the extra step of creating their own content, summarising what is going on in Gaza.

Lepak Conversations is an advocacy platform which provides a space for Malays in Singapore to engage in *lepak* (accessible) conversations. In November 2023, they posted informational content on why and how one can discuss the issue of Palestine. The posts provided helpful tips on choosing the right tone and terms to prevent heated conversations on this sensitive topic, while also facilitating discussions and sharing viewpoints. The community's response was positive, with comments expressing appreciation for the bite-sized information that clarified the meanings of terms related to the discussion of Palestine⁵.

Singaporean youths have also been actively posting about the Singapore Palestine Film Festival 2024 happening from 12 to 21 January 2024, at The Projector at Cineleisure. This festival will be showing a curated selection of 10 impactful films that bring attention to the challenges experienced by the people of Palestine. The primary goal is to enhance cultural awareness and foster a deeper understanding of the situation among the Singaporean audience. All proceeds generated from the film festival will be directed to the Singapore Red Cross, supporting their relief and recovery endeavours alongside the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement Partners. These organisations have been actively engaged on the ground, addressing the immediate needs of civilians affected by the crisis⁶. Response has been overwhelming, with more slots recently added for certain films. This shows how impactful reposting on social media can be.

¹ Vochelet, R. (2023, October 27). *Singaporeans Turn to Online Campaigns After Police Reject Application for Gaza Rally*. The Diplomat.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/singaporeans-turn-to-online-campaigns-after-police-reject-application-for-gaza-rally/>

² Voices of Youth. (2023, March 27). *The social impact of youth*. <https://www.voicesofyouth.org/blog/social-impact-youth>

³ BBC News. (2023, November 15) Greta Thunberg: Who is the climate activist and what has she achieved? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49918719>

⁴ Nations, U. (2022). United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. Un.org.

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml#:~:text=To%20constitute%20genocide%2C%20there%20must,to%20simply%20disperse%20a%20group.>

⁵ Lepak Conversations [lepakconversations]. (2023, November 19). "[This is a safe space. Any hateful speech will be reported and removed.] Knowing the right words to use when discussing complex topics like the ongoing genocide in Palestine can help us approach the discussion in a productive manner. It can also be an opportunity to learn about what the commonly used terms really mean, and why using the appropriate terms matter. Here is a list of a few terms to help you get started." Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cz00FYChYyj/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

⁶ The Projector. (2024, January 12). *Singapore Palestine Film Festival*. <https://theprojector.sg/themes/singapore-palestine-film-festival/>

Another way Singaporeans have played their role in youth activism for Palestine is through supporting small businesses that are openly raising funds to provide aid for Palestinians. Small, self-run enterprises such as @aroomwithtowelsforcurtains and @woodyouclaywithme on Instagram have raised funds through the sale of their art pieces. One could argue that such efforts may not be of much contribution to an issue as dire as the Palestinian genocide, but it is undoubtable that these efforts have brought greater awareness and perhaps inspired other small businesses to take similar steps to encourage youth activism and support for Palestine.

It's also worth mentioning that boycotts are a form of activism, and perhaps the most effective method for youths in Singapore who may feel strongly compelled to take strong action in support of Palestine but are unable to. Boycotts have greatly helped to raise further awareness and put economic pressure on complicit entities in the Palestinian genocide. A notable example of that would be Puma, which initially endorsed Israeli athletes but has now ended their sponsorship of Israel's football team. While they claim that this is not tied to the ongoing pro-Palestine boycotts, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement welcomed the move as it serves as a signal to other complicit entities working within or with Israel⁷. Such news pertaining to the boycotts has certainly shown that one's efforts, no matter how small or simple, can make a significant impact, thus strengthening youth voices and activism efforts in Singapore.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUTH ACTIVISM IN SINGAPORE

Youth activism in Singapore began as early as the 1960s. On November 20, 1960, University of Malaya students in Singapore protested the People's Action Party government's treatment of Professor Dennis Joseph Enright, who had been accused of criticising cultural policies. About five hundred students, a third of the undergraduate population, boycotted classes the next day, denouncing

government efforts to suppress free discussion and intimidate individuals⁸. This historical incident emphasises the importance of youth activism as it shows how youths can express dissent against perceived injustices. It also showcases the ability of young people to organise and express their concerns, playing a crucial role in the larger story of civic involvement and the quest for democratic principles in Singapore's history. Thus, youth activism emerges as a pivotal force in fostering accountability, safeguarding rights, and influencing societal norms.

Youth activism is still relevant and very much needed to this day, illustrated by the following three key points.

I. *Power of Youth*

In the contemporary landscape of Singapore, the societal influence wielded by the youth is indisputable. Adolescents and young adults emerge as highly influential figures in our community, capable of significantly contributing to positive transformations. Harnessing their substantial potential, young people can effect change by elevating awareness, formulating solutions, and imparting knowledge to others². With their fresh perspectives, innovative ideas and pivotal role in society, this demographic has high potential when it comes to making a difference in our society.

When youths contribute to the conversation, particularly on social media, they help shape public opinion in their community and in turn, whoever sees their content can help to influence their community regardless of whether they may be in Singapore or not. Participation in discussions by Singaporean youths can create a ripple effect, influencing not just their local community but resonating with global audiences as well. This is particularly noteworthy for Singaporeans residing abroad, as their involvement in protests and marches organised in different countries has the potential to bolster local youth activism. Acting as a catalyst, their initiatives inspire

Youth activism plays an important role when it comes to social equality, due to the impact it has. Several social issues have been brought up recently to highlight injustices in society. Especially with the tech-enabled devices that offer continuous access to both news and user-generated content, youths only need to click a button to make the first move towards the right direction. Hence, our youths must ensure that Singapore does not let go of our values as a nation and to keep fighting for social equality.

⁷ Melvin Backman. [2023, December 12]. *Puma says ending its sponsorship of Israel's soccer team isn't tied to pro-Palestinian boycotts*. Quartz. <https://qz.com/puma-says-ending-its-sponsorship-of-israels-soccer-team-1851093571>

⁸ Liao, E. [2023]. "Nearest to the Norm": The Cultural Politics of Elite Youth Activism in 1960s Singapore. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 38(1), 66–93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27201634>

others to persist in voicing their opinions and demonstrating solidarity for the Palestinian cause, contributing to the development of a worldwide network of informed and committed activists. Another example would be the practice of utilising boycotts as a tool within grassroots movements, becoming a powerful means for individuals and communities to express solidarity with the Palestinian cause. This grassroots activism has the potential to create a groundswell of support that transcends borders and cultural differences.

II. Political Awareness

Today, youths are constantly exposed to political activities. However, why should political awareness be prioritised? The issue of political unawareness is a shared responsibility among individuals, society, and the state. The significant drawback of political ignorance is the emergence of uninformed leadership. Hence, youths must be aware of their rights, especially when there are political changes so that they can comprehend their rights and express their opinions in an informed manner⁹.

Singapore has usually been known as having a strong one-party system. The prevalence of a single-party rule frequently results in making youths navigating within the existing legal boundaries when related to political change a challenge. Some of the challenges when it comes to political activism include legal limitations. This emphasises further the importance of being politically aware. Nevertheless, there have still been quite a number of youths engaging in political dialogues and discussions – especially on online platforms. The ongoing impact of this activism in instigating political change is a dynamic process influenced by various factors.

During the pandemic, the 2020 General Elections in Singapore became a focal point, with both the

incumbent and opposition parties addressing pandemic-related concerns. Recognising the heightened interest in local politics during the crisis, CAPE (Community for Advocacy and Political Education), a political advocacy group from Yale-NUS, intensified its efforts to enhance civic awareness. They also utilised social media to disseminate information about the electoral process by creating simplified and well-designed infographics to address political concepts, electoral fairness and the GRC system in Singapore¹⁰.

Continued efforts in educating the public on political matters, especially the youths, is crucial in ensuring that Singapore is always on the right path, with well-informed and educated citizens. This can be done through youth activism as youths are the future of our nation.

III. Societal Equality

In other countries, social inequality may be more prominent as compared to Singapore. A recent case of social inequality and injustice that brought activists all over the world into action would be Black Lives Matter (BLM). Thandiwe Abdullah is a 13-year-old youth activist who co-founded BLM Youth Vanguard. Thandiwe played a crucial role in incorporating the BLM movement into school programmes. Specifically, the efforts of the BLM Youth Vanguard concentrated on minimising the presence of police in the LA Unified School Districts (LAUSD). They achieved success by persuading the reallocation of \$25 million from the LA Schools Police Department to LAUSD and putting an end to random searches within the district. Currently, they are actively working towards the complete removal of school police from campuses¹¹.

A recent incident that showed Singapore's inequality would be when 17-year-old Zoe Gabriel showed her new Charles & Keith bag on TikTok. She deemed the bag a "luxury" but her

viewers strongly disagreed. The video garnered more than 20 million views, with many insulting and mocking comments left in her comment section. She then proceeded to post another video to explain that she did not grow up with much. Hence, she found the \$80 bag a luxury. This time, it received a positive reaction from the viewers, including Mr Lawrence Wong, the current Deputy Prime Minister and prospective future leader of the country, who referenced the incident in a speech where he encouraged Singaporeans not to excessively focus on status and social prestige¹².

Youth activism plays an important role when it comes to social equality, due to the impact it has. Several social issues have been brought up recently to highlight injustices in society. Especially with the tech-enabled devices that offer continuous access to both news and user-generated content, youths only need to click a button to make the first move towards the right direction. Hence, our youths must ensure that Singapore does not let go of our values as a nation and to keep fighting for social equality.

With the influential power youths have to urge others, they need to utilise it well and be the driving force for positive transformations. Youth activism will also help with political awareness by fostering informed citizenship and making a difference in the political scene. Youth activists are also playing a huge role in addressing societal inequalities in Singapore.

In Islam, youths have a role in shaping the world into a peaceful one. Our religion underscores the significant role of youth in shaping a prosperous future, acknowledging their capacity for growth and effectiveness. As shared by Islamonweb, "The Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*), in his wisdom, advised the youth to make the most of their youth, health, wealth, free time, and life itself. In the *hadith*, Ibn Abbas (r.a.) reported that the Messenger of Allah (*pbuh*) said, "Take advantage of five before five: your youth

⁹ Harisur Rohman [2023, January 9]. *Why should young people be politically aware?* The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/shout/news/why-should-young-people-be-politically-aware-3212801>

¹⁰ See Tow Jo Ann. [2021, June 22]. *"Young people can't change anything?" These youths prove otherwise.* A Good Space. <https://www.agoodspace.org/young-people-cant-change-anything-these-youths-prove-otherwise/>


¹¹ National Action Network. [2021, August 14]. *A Message... A Movement... A Role Model! ACTIVISM SPOTLIGHT.* <https://nationalactionnetwork.net/chapter/a-message-a-movement-a-role-model-activism-spotlight/>

¹² Nicholas Yong. [2023, January 30]. *Singapore inequality: How a tote bag sparked a debate about class.* BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64342107>

“The Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*), in his wisdom, advised the youth to make the most of their youth, health, wealth, free time, and life itself. In the *hadith*, Ibn Abbas (r.a.) reported that the Messenger of Allah (*pbuh*) said, “Take advantage of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your illness, your riches before your poverty, your free time before your work, and your life before your death.” This guidance aligns with modern scientific understanding, which acknowledges the vitality and innovation of young minds” This also reiterates the point in which the youth have a significant role to play in the community due to their capabilities during their young age.

before your old age, your health before your illness, your riches before your poverty, your free time before your work, and your life before your death.” This guidance aligns with modern scientific understanding, which acknowledges the vitality and innovation of young minds¹³ This also reiterates the point in which the youth have a significant role to play in the community due to their capabilities during their young age.

Every youth can make a difference. It all matters – from simply reposting a social media post to participating in a campaign. ■



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¹³ Muhammed Almasudheen. (2023, September 14). *Role of Youth for a Peaceful Future*. Islamonweb. <https://en.islamonweb.net/role-of-youth-for-a-peaceful-future#:~:text=Islam%20places%20great%20emphasis%20on,free%20time%2C%20and%20life%20itself>

Instagram, TikTok and the battle for hearts and minds: Social media's impact on activism

BY AHMAD ABDULLAH



Beyond selfies and viral trends, social media has undeniably had an impact on society and human communication.

One of the areas where platforms like Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter), among others, have shaped conversations is in the field of activism.

From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter to MeToo — which in 2019 found a local equivalent in Monica Baey's voyeurism case going viral — it is hard to think of a major movement over the past decade or more where social media has not played a role in amplifying and bringing to a wider audience.

Nowhere has social media's role in amplifying activism been clearer than on the issue of Palestine.

This was first seen in 2021, when Palestinians living in the Sheikh Jarrah region of disputed East Jerusalem shared videos of themselves getting evicted from their homes on social media.

This gained the attention of celebrities and social media influencers, who in turn helped shape public opinion on the issue by sharing posts and videos about the Sheikh Jarrah issue to their millions of followers.

History repeated itself in 2023, with Instagram becoming a battleground for the hearts and minds of social media users as Israel bombarded the Gaza Strip following Hamas' attack on October 7.

As of end 2023, the ensuing attacks on Gaza have claimed more than 27,000 civilian lives in the 365 sq km enclave, according to an estimate by the non-profit Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor.¹

This has led to South Africa filing a case with the International Court of Justice on December 29, accusing Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians.

A New York Times article in November reported that with international journalists largely prevented from entering Gaza, reporting on the unfolding crisis in the enclave had largely occurred on social media.²

Armed with little more than a camera and a smartphone, the likes of Motaz Azaiza – a 24-year-old part-time producer with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – and 22-year-old Plestia Alaqa, who previously worked with a marketing agency, became independent journalists, documenting Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip on Instagram.³

A line is typically drawn between journalism and activism, with traditional media attempting to remain objective in most circumstances.

However, the men and women capturing the suffering of ordinary Palestinians often blurred that line, making impassioned pleas for an end to the Israeli incursion into Gaza.

Their work – documenting injured and dying children as well as their distraught parents, the ruins of bombed apartment buildings and subsequently the displacement of millions of Gazan residents – via photos and videos posted on Instagram could be considered a form of activism.

It circumvented the restrictions faced by other journalists, reaching millions, including many who were perhaps unaware of the situation faced by Palestinians prior to this.

This growing awareness of the humanitarian crisis faced by Gazans, in turn, inspired widespread worldwide protests, calling for a ceasefire amid the Israeli invasion of the enclave.

After all, they could hardly be expected to remain neutral as they themselves are forced to live through the carnage and displacement caused by the conflict.

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¹ Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor. (2023, December 27). *Statistics on the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip (07 – 27 December)*. <http://euromedmonitor.org/a/6063>

² Yousur Al-Hlou & Nikolay Nikolov. (2023, November 19). *The War in Gaza Is Also Unfolding on Instagram*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-instagram.html>

³ Sugra Khanwala. (2023, December 15). *How Gaza war changed this 22-year-old Palestinian journalist's life*. Khaleej Times. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/long-reads/from-instagrammer-to-war-correspondent-how-gaza-crisis-changed-this-palestinians-life>

⁴ Harriet Sherwood. (2023, December 12). *'Hugely frustrating': international media seek to overcome Gaza ban*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/12/hugely-frustrating-international-media-seek-to-overcome-gaza-ban>

Parallels can be drawn with how, more than half a century earlier, television news reports on the Vietnam War brought the horrors of the war into the living rooms of the United States, galvanising the anti-war movement of the time.⁵

Closer to home, this year, the Singapore Police Force and National Parks Board disallowed all public rallies on the Israel-Gaza war, citing public safety and security concerns.

The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority would also later warn travellers at Singapore's checkpoints against wearing or displaying items related to the Middle East conflict.

This is despite previous rallies on the issue being allowed, including a 2014 demonstration in support of the Palestinian cause at Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park amid tensions in Gaza at the time.⁶

Still, social media-driven campaigns have allowed people here to show solidarity with the people of Gaza, albeit in a more subdued manner.

These include calls to donate to humanitarian organisations on the ground in the Gaza Strip, wearing particular colours of clothing on specific days as a form of silent protest, and writing to political leaders to persuade the authorities to call for an end to hostilities in the region.⁷

Still, social media is not without its shortcomings, not least because of how content moderation on such online platforms tends to be an opaque matter.

Some Instagram users have claimed the platform had "shadowbanned" their posts about Gaza — a term referring to a type of platform moderation that limits the reach of certain content, rather than explicitly banning it.⁸

In October, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, blamed this on a bug, claiming this affected accounts "equally around the globe", regardless of the nature of their content.⁹

There is also the danger of the spread of misinformation and disinformation, given the nature of social media algorithms to be driven by controversy and polarisation.

CNA reported in November that there was what it described as a "steady stream of inaccurate content" on the war spreading on short video platform TikTok.¹⁰

For example, video footage of the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 was misleadingly identified as being that of Gaza during the current conflict.

Experts cited by the regional media outfit in its article warned such misinformation could lead to consequences, such as stoking division between different religious groups.

So, does this mean that social media is unreliable as a means of raising awareness and calling for action with regard to certain causes?

I think this is hardly the case, as can be seen in how scenes of the carnage in Gaza have compelled many who were previously uninformed on the matter to speak up for the suffering of innocent Palestinians.

Rather, what is needed is for us to be conscientious consumers of social media — as we should be of traditional media or any other sources of information we encounter as well.

Even as we turn to Instagram or TikTok for news, whether on Palestine or other issues, we should be aware of the limitations of these platforms and do our best to verify information that

seems unbelievable or comes from sources that may appear to be unreliable.

And of course, we should strive to ensure that our activism on social media translates itself into real-world action, wherever and however possible. ■

Ahmad Abdullah holds a bachelor's degree in English literature from Goldsmiths, University of London. He is a part-time writer.

⁵ Michael Wines. [2023, December 24]. *In Campus Protests Over Gaza, Echoes of Outcry Over Vietnam*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/24/us/gaza-vietnam-student-protest.html>

⁶ Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh. [2014, July 26]. *Hundreds gather at Hong Lim Park in solidarity with people of Gaza*. The Straits Times. <https://str.sg/3MW5>

⁷ Robin Vochelet. [2023, October 27]. *Singaporeans Turn to Online Campaigns After Police Reject Application for Gaza Rally*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/singaporeans-turn-to-online-campaigns-after-police-reject-application-for-gaza-rally/>

⁸ A.W. Ohlheimer. [2023, October 29]. *Why some Palestinians believe social media companies are suppressing their posts*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/technology/23933846/shadowbanning-meta-israel-hamas-war-palestine>

⁹ Ng Hong Siang. [2023, October 17]. *Were you 'shadow-banned' on Instagram for sharing pro-Palestinian stories? It was a bug, says Meta*. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/meta-instagram-shadow-ban-palestine-bug-3852026>

¹⁰ Louisa Tang & Aqil Haziq Mahmud. [2023, November 7]. *IN FOCUS: How fake news on Israel-Hamas stokes outrage, hatred and 'potential for violence' on Southeast Asian TikTok*. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/israel-hamas-tiktok-misinformation-gaza-disinformation-palestinian-fake-news-falsehoods-3894006>

Understanding Mental Health in the Malay-Muslim Community

BY SITI NURALIYA BINTI AZMAN



In recent years, public discourses on topics related to mental health have become increasingly popular within Singapore society and the local Malay-Muslim community. However, such increases have not lessened the stigmatisation and discrimination towards people with mental illnesses. A study conducted in 2016 revealed that Malays had higher prejudice and misconception towards mental illness but also noted that they also have greater tolerance for individuals with mental health issues.¹ Another study published in the same year also found that the Malay community's knowledge of mental health is still lacking and stigmatising beliefs about mental health issues still exist within the Malay-Muslim community.²

Addressing mental health concerns in the Malay-Muslim community remains a struggle primarily due to the intricate intertwining of religious beliefs and cultural practices. A delicate balance between acknowledging traditional perceptions of mental health issues and integrating modern approaches to support holistic well-being is required to improve the community's mental health literacy. To understand how the Malay-Muslim community navigates mental health, we must first understand what mental health is.

DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH

According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is more than the absence of mental illnesses. It is a state of well-being in which the individual is able to realise his or her abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to his or her community. A person's mental health may be affected by multiple interrelated social, psychological and biological factors.³ Mental health issues can affect people regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status and age. To put it simply, mental health is for everyone.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS MENTAL HEALTH

Previous studies have examined differing attitudes towards mental health ranging from acceptance, tolerance, and stigma to even fear.⁴ Within the Malay community, mental health is often described using various terms specific to the region, reflecting different forms of mental illnesses. Expressions like *gila meroyan* (postpartum depression) and *buatan orang* (psychoses) are commonly used.⁵ In addition, many within the Malay community hold on to the belief that certain mental disorders are the work of black magic or evil spirits.⁶ Another common view is that mental illness is a test from God, or "illness of the soul".⁷ Yuen *et al's* study also found that Malays had higher prejudice and misconception towards mental illness compared to the Chinese.⁸ They postulated that religion, to some extent, shapes the Malay community's understanding of mental health.

ISSUES WITH MENTAL HEALTH AS 'A TEST FROM GOD'

Islam is the religion practised by the large majority of Malays in Singapore and the dominant view is that mental illness is perceived as a test from God or an illness that could be treated as an opportunity to remedy disconnection from God or resolve a lack of faith through regular prayer and a sense of self-responsibility.⁹ Furthermore, a separate study also found that Malays were significantly associated with higher weak-not-sick scores. Scores on the 'weak-not-sick' scale gauge how inclined individuals or groups are to regard mental health challenges as personal weaknesses rather than as medical conditions. According to this study, Malays tend to view mental health issues as a weakness rather than an illness.¹⁰ The stigmatising attitudes and misconceptions within the community regarding mental health can be said to stem from the deep connection between mental well-being and

spirituality. This has led to many being ashamed to talk about a member of their family experiencing mental distress because of the negative perceptions society has of individuals with mental issues. Additionally, those who choose to share their struggles or stresses may be deemed to be emotionally 'weak', lacking in faith in Islam, or worse, choosing to be 'mad'.¹¹ It is therefore unsurprising that many who face mental health challenges remain reluctant to come forward to seek professional treatment. They often feel belittled and view themselves as being a 'burden' to society. Prejudicial beliefs and misconceptions about mental health are a barrier to people seeking help.

TREATMENT APPROACHES IN THE MALAY COMMUNITY

As religion remains central in understanding mental health challenges among Malays, the dominant approaches in addressing its issues have also remained in the form of religious practices. A study conducted in 2020 investigated factors associated with using complementary and alternative medicine for mental illness among the three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Indians and Malays) in the general population of Singapore. Complementary or alternative medicine (CAM) is defined as "a broad set of health care practices that are not part of that country's tradition or conventional medicine and are not fully integrated into the dominant health-care system."¹² Practices such as prayer, recitation of the Quran, and other spiritual activities are considered as CAM. These alternative practices are frequently employed in treating mental health issues in the Malay-Muslim community.¹³ Seeking remedies from traditional healers through practices like *ruqyah shar'iyah*, involving spiritual healing through Quranic recitations and prophetic traditions is also common.¹⁴ The preference for these alternative practices as compared to

¹ Yuan, Q., Abidin, E., Picco, L., Vaingankar, J. A., Shahwan, S., Jeyagurunathan, A., Sagayadevan, V., Shafie, S., Tay, J., Chong, S. A., & Subramaniam, M. *Attitudes to Mental Illness and Its Demographic Correlates among General Population in Singapore*. PLoS One, 11(11), e0167297–e0167297, 2016.

² Subramaniam, M., E. Abidin, L. Picco, S. Pang, S. Shafie, J. A. Vaingankar, K. W. Kwok, K. Verma, and S. A. Chong. *Stigma towards People with Mental Disorders and Its Components – a Perspective from Multi-ethnic Singapore*. Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences 26, no. 4 (2017): 371–82. doi:10.1017/S2045796016000159, 2016.

³ World Health Organization (WHO), *Mental Health: Strengthening Our Response* accessed, 2023, December 7. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

⁴ Yuan et al. *Attitudes to Mental Illness and Its Demographic Correlates among General Population in Singapore*.

⁵ Razak A. A., 2017. *Cultural Construction of Psychiatric Illness in Malaysia*. The Malaysian journal of medical sciences: MJMS, 24(2), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.21315/mjms2017.24.2.1>

⁶ Radiah Salim. *State of Mental Healthcare in the Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore – "Tak Kenal Maka Tak Cinta"*. The Karyawan, 2017, October 15. Retrieved from <https://karyawan.sg/state-of-mental-healthcare-in-the-mmc-in-singapore-tak-kenal-maka-tak-cinta/>

⁷ Yuan et al., 2016. *Attitudes to Mental Illness and Its Demographic Correlates among General Population in Singapore*.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Subramaniam et al. 2016. *Stigma towards People with Mental Disorders and Its Components – a Perspective from Multi-ethnic Singapore*.

¹¹ Salim, R. *State of Mental Healthcare in the Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore – "Tak Kenal Maka Tak Cinta"*. The Karyawan, 2017, October 15. Retrieved from <https://karyawan.sg/state-of-mental-healthcare-in-the-mmc-in-singapore-tak-kenal-maka-tak-cinta/>

¹² Seet, Vanessa, Edmansyah Abidin, Janhavi A. Vaingankar, Shazana Shahwan, Sheryllyn Chang, Bernard Lee, Siow A. Chong, and Mythily Subramaniam. *The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in a Multi-Ethnic Asian Population: Results from the 2016 Singapore Mental Health Study*. BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine 20, no. 1 (2020): 52–52.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Razali, Z. A., Rahman, N. A. A., & Husin, S. (2018). *Complementing the Treatment of a Major Depressive Disorder Patient with Ruqyah Shar'iyah Therapy: A Malaysian Case Study*. Journal of Muslim Mental Health, 12(2).

conventional healthcare services may be due to accessibility and lower costs of these practices. Relative to consulting healthcare experts, practices such as prayer and other spiritual practices are generally free or less costly than conventional healthcare.¹⁵

TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Despite these alternative approaches being highly accessible and cost-effective, a reliance solely on these methods in dealing with mental health issues has certain limitations. Dr Radiah Salim highlighted that many in the community usually turn to traditional healers as an immediate helpline to address mental health challenges and only go to the psychiatrist as a last resort. She explained that such approaches can lead to delays in diagnosis and hinder early intervention, potentially worsening the recovery process for individuals.¹⁶ However, it is still worth noting that there are positive functions of religious practices in supporting individuals in difficult times. From a religious perspective, referring and relating to the Quranic and prophetic texts and internalising the meaning of the verses and sayings can help us to recognise and accept our strengths and weaknesses as humans, acknowledge Allah's might and never give up on His Mercy.¹⁷ On the other hand, from a practical standpoint, seeking professional help can provide greater support and effectively cater to the needs of the individual facing mental health issues resulting in a smoother recovery process. The issue of mental health is real and should not be taken lightly. Ultimately, an integrated approach combining both religious practices and conventional healthcare services is crucial for holistic mental health support for the Malay-Muslim community.

CLUB HEAL

Efforts have been initiated within the Malay community to improve the understanding and treatment of mental health issues. Dr Radiah, the founder of Club Heal, calls for a comprehensive approach that encompasses biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects

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while valuing religious beliefs and practices that can offer comfort to individuals when confronted with mental health challenges.¹⁸ Club Heal adopts an integrative approach involving Qualified Practitioners of Islamic Medicine and psychiatric treatments. It also provides psycho-education, and supportive counseling to its clients and families at its Mental Wellness Centres and conducts outreach programmes to those facing

mental health challenges and the general public. Currently, Club Heal is already working alongside Muslim leaders in Singapore to integrate psychiatric and spiritual approaches. It should be noted that while Club Heal caters to the needs of Muslims, their services are accessible to all regardless of race or religion.¹⁹

¹⁵ Seet et. al. *The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in a Multi-Ethnic Asian Population: Results from the 2016 Singapore Mental Health Study*.

¹⁶ Salim, R. *State of Mental Healthcare in the Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore – "Tak Kenal Maka Tak Cinta"*. The Karyawan. 2017, October 15. Retrieved from <https://karyawan.sg/state-of-mental-healthcare-in-the-mmc-in-singapore-tak-kenal-maka-tak-cinta/>

¹⁷ Muhammad Zulkarnain Bin Azman, *What Does Islam Say About Mental Health*, accessed. 2023, December 7. Retrieved from <https://muslim.sg/articles/what-does-islam-say-about-mental-health>.

¹⁸ Salim, R. *State of Mental Healthcare in the Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore – "Tak Kenal Maka Tak Cinta"*. The Karyawan. 2017, October 15. Retrieved from <https://karyawan.sg/state-of-mental-healthcare-in-the-mmc-in-singapore-tak-kenal-maka-tak-cinta/>

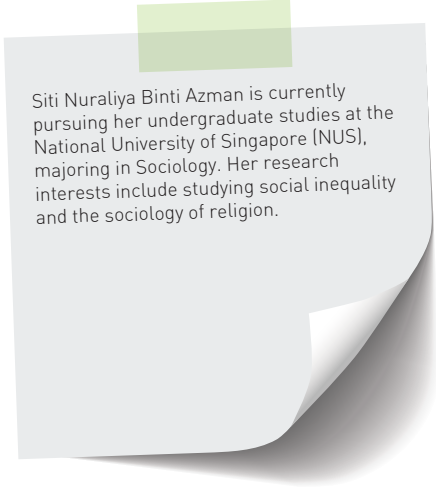
¹⁹ Club HEAL. Retrieved from <https://www.clubheal.sg/about-us>

“ARE YOU OK, BRO?”

In addition to Club Heal, Lepak Conversations, an activist group with an advocacy platform that promotes *lepak* (accessible) conversations about contemporary issues recently partnered with the Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH) for a panel event named “Are You Ok, Bro?” held on 14th October. The fully booked event catered to young participants, drawing in 41 male attendees comprising both Malays and non-Malays/Muslims. Among them, nine individuals were above the age of 35, contributing to the event’s diverse demographic. This first-of-its-kind male mental health event not only offers a unique space for males to engage in somatic exercises that help participants release their stored emotions from the body but also encourages them to share deep insights and their lived experiences as Malay or non-Malay men. Throughout the event, the speakers identified similar experiences, notably the pressure to suppress emotions and project strength when growing up. They emphasised that their initial reluctance to seek help when dealing with mental difficulties originated from their socio-religious upbringing. This upbringing places significant importance on men avoiding vulnerability or any sign of weakness, while also expecting them to be self-sufficient and accomplished in their professional lives.²⁰ The event serves as a starting point towards understanding the challenges experienced by Malay men and by extension, the community, without dismissing the religious perspective.

MOVING FORWARD

Navigating mental health within the Malay-Muslim community involves acknowledging traditional beliefs, integrating modern practices, and fostering inclusive discussions to better support individuals in their mental health journey while respecting their religious and cultural perspectives. Stigmatising attitudes towards mental health coupled with misconceptions about mental illness is still pervasive within the Malay-Muslim community despite existing efforts to reduce stigma. Reducing stigma through encouraging open conversations together with providing accessible and integrated mental health services are pivotal steps toward improving the well-being of individuals within this community. ■

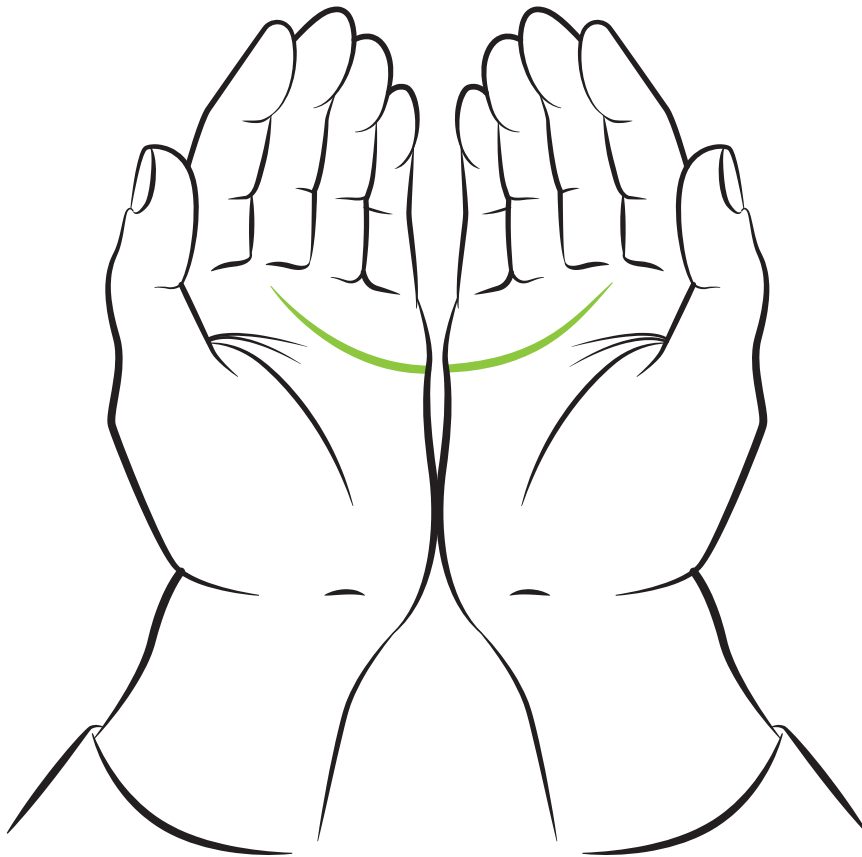


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²⁰ LepakConversations, “Male mental health isn’t just about toxic masculinity”: A nuanced conversation about Malay male mental health, accessed. 2023, December 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/male-mental-health-isnt-just-toxic-masculinity-nuanced-clgie/>

Navigating the Path: A Chinese Convert's Journey in Singapore

BY KAVEN SIDDIQUE LIM



As a Chinese convert to Islam living in Singapore, my journey as a convert has been one of both hardship and immense reward. I have faced challenges such as isolation from friends and social circles, dealing with cultural differences, and learning about a new religion. However, I have also experienced the joy of discovering Islam, the beauty of the

Muslim community and the deep sense of peace and fulfilment that comes with submitting to Allah's will.

I am grateful for the support I have received from my family, friends, and the Muslim community in Singapore. I am also grateful for the organisations that provide resources and support to

converts. Without their help, my journey would have been much more difficult. Before I delve into the challenges that I have faced as a new convert and how the Muslim community has supported me through my process of coming into an Islamic lifestyle, it is worthy to note that in most cases, a returning Muslim or rediscovering Muslim shares a lot in

common with Muslim converts. Much of the challenges or learning curve of being a convert stems from the fact that we do not have prior knowledge of Islamic practices or even a basic understanding of the Arabic language. In the same vein, returning Muslims face the same learning curve too. Additionally, the adoption of an Islamic lifestyle after professing our faith is not merely a spiritual change; it is a social and emotional change as well. As such, returning Muslims and Muslim converts both experience changes within their social circles, which pose significant challenges for both groups. Therefore, with this short reflection, I pray that my experiences will benefit the Muslim community in general – that regardless of where we come from, we start seeing that every Muslim experiences with personal challenges. Once we see that our challenges are not tied to where we are and who is around us, we realise that there's always beauty and ease in showing love, concern and support to the people around us. This light of belief and faith shines outwards through our actions and our Muslim community becomes a home for new and returning Muslims.

May Allah *swt* guide us and open our hearts to become conduits to receive and transmit His Divine Love and allow this blessed transmission of love to be the means of the beautification of our outward and inward character.

Here are some challenges that I have faced along my journey of finding my Muslim convert identity.

FINDING MY PLACE

One of the major challenges I face is forging my own unique identity. Converts come from families with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, often vastly different from the predominantly Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. Integrating these with our newfound faith can be a delicate dance and can sometimes create tension between embracing our heritage and integrating it with our newfound Islamic values.

The ideal path lies in forging a third space: a unique Muslim convert identity

that embraces both our heritage and our faith. This requires a conscious effort to understand the nuances of both cultures, identifying similarities and celebrating differences. It also involves actively seeking knowledge and guidance from both our families and the Muslim community, creating a network of support that respects our individual journeys. We should not strive to completely abandon our past or blindly adopt the practices of the Malay-Muslim community. Instead, we must create our own unique Muslim convert identity, one that embraces both our heritage and our faith.

Our pre-Islamic background is not something to be ashamed of, but rather a valuable foundation upon which we can build our Muslim identity. Embracing our heritage allows us to connect with our families and communities, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. Organisations can contribute to this process by fostering an inclusive environment that appreciates the richness of cultural diversity within the Muslim community. By emphasising the universal values of Islam while respecting individual backgrounds, converts can forge a unique identity that harmonises with both their cultural heritage and newfound faith.

DEALING WITH LOSS

Many converts feel a sense of loss when they embrace Islam. They may miss certain aspects of their previous traditions or feel disconnected from their families and friends who may not understand their new faith. This can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Converts who might have partaken in recreational activities like consuming alcohol or attending parties in clubs and bars in the past as natural social behaviour, often stop these activities shortly after embracing Islam. As a result, it is very normal to see new Muslims lose entire social circles and temporarily experience a sharp decrease in meaningful social interactions, which are important for a person's mental, emotional and spiritual health.

However, it is important to remember that we are not alone in this journey. There are many other converts who have faced similar challenges and have found ways to navigate them.

This period of adjustment is an opportunity for personal growth and resilience. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) remind us that difficulties are part of life, and seeking support from a community that understands these challenges can be transformative.

By acknowledging and addressing the sense of loss, organisations can tailor their support systems to help converts navigate this transitional phase effectively. This may include specialised programmes, counselling services, and community-building initiatives that foster connections among converts.

We can find support and guidance from organisations like Converts Central which can connect us to individuals who have undergone their own conversions to Islam. Unique platforms like these serve as a vital link connecting individuals who have recently embraced Islam with seasoned practitioners who have traversed similar paths. A support system where the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of those who have undergone the conversion process can be shared and learned from is imperative to support and illuminate the way for converts to overcome challenges, find solace in shared experiences, and embark on their newfound journey with confidence and resilience.

FINDING A BALANCE

Another challenge we face is finding a middle ground in balancing our faith and practice. This is a central challenge faced by converts and born Muslims alike. We are eager to learn and grow in our faith, but we also need to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Too much focus on external practice can sometimes make our faith weary. Just as Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) said, "Verily, the religion is easy and no one burdens himself in religion but that it overwhelms him" (*Sahih Bukhari*), we need to make

Another challenge we face is finding a middle ground in balancing our faith and practice. This is a central challenge faced by converts and born Muslims alike. We are eager to learn and grow in our faith, but we also need to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Too much focus on external practice can sometimes make our faith weary. Just as Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) said, “Verily, the religion is easy and no one burdens himself in religion but that it overwhelms him” (*Sahih Bukhari*), we need to make steady and consistent increments to our Islamic practice while also ensuring that our learning journey is one of joy and fulfilment.

steady and consistent increments to our Islamic practice while also ensuring that our learning journey is one of joy and fulfilment.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of trying to “out-Muslim” everyone else. We may feel the need to prove ourselves to others or to compensate for the fact that we were not born Muslim. However, this is ultimately a counterproductive approach. We should focus on our personal journey, dedicating to please Allah, not people. The key lies in finding a balance that works for us individually. This means setting realistic goals, prioritising our learning, and allowing ourselves to make and learn from mistakes.

It also involves seeking guidance from trusted scholars who can provide tailored advice and support. One of the best ways to find balance is to seek guidance from a knowledgeable and trustworthy

scholar. A good scholar can help us to understand the Quran and Sunnah in a way that resonates with our lives and steering us away from extremism and needless adversity.

Additionally, by drawing on the Prophet’s teachings on moderation and consistency, organisations can play a crucial role in guiding converts through the intricate process of integrating Islamic practices into their unique cultural and familial contexts.

BUILDING A SUPPORT SYSTEM

As Muslim converts navigating our unique paths in Singapore, the support of Islamic organisations play a vital role in our journeys. These organisations go beyond mere information provision, fostering a sense of belonging and community that nurtures our faith and empowers us to thrive.

Converts Central, specifically, has established itself as a vital resource for new and returning Muslims. Their tailored classes and community building provide us with a strong foundation in Islamic principles and practices, effectively dispelling any confusion and doubts that may arise. Additionally, their individual and group counselling sessions offer invaluable support, addressing personal and spiritual concerns in a safe and confidential environment.

The social events and gatherings organised by Converts Central are also an essential source of connection. Sharing our experiences with fellow converts who understand our unique challenges fosters a sense of belonging and community, combating feelings of isolation and alienation. This network of support becomes a source of strength and encouragement, reminding us that we are not alone on our journeys.

Organisations like Converts Central have also recognised the challenges that Muslim converts face in terms of identity and actively work to address them. They offer events that help converts understand their unique identity, explore the intersections between their faith and culture, and build a sense of belonging within the Muslim community. This fosters a safe space for converts to ask questions, share experiences, and learn from one another.

Beyond supporting individual needs, Converts Central actively promotes understanding and respect for converts within the wider Muslim community. This advocacy work helps to break down barriers and create an environment of inclusivity, where converts feel valued and welcomed.

THE “X” FACTOR

We have spoken about the frequent struggles that converts face while navigating their Islamic journey. Although common, these challenges are certainly not exhaustive. Being on the path of service towards converts and returning Muslims in the past 4 years, I have personally learnt that the biggest

challenge lies in how unique and personal each of our issues is.

My experience as a Chinese Muslim convert may help other Chinese Muslim converts, but it certainly will be less beneficial to an Indian Muslim convert, who was a Hindu who grew up in a Singaporean-Indian family, missing his Indian dishes and delicacies like how I miss my traditional Chinese food.

Human nature drives us to perceive everything that we interact with within the frameworks of categories, lines, and segments. Oftentimes, we take a step back when we see unfamiliar “categories.” The question that we need to ask ourselves is this – What is the “X” factor which enables a Muslim and Muslim organisations to be beneficial to every Muslim in need of support when we do not neatly fit in their “categories” or “segments”?

I will share what I have personally benefited from the amazing Muslims that have surrounded me over the past few years. There are two “X” factors.

The first one is collaboration. One person cannot help everyone. Similarly, we cannot expect the organisations around us to take on the responsibility of addressing all challenges we face as a community. We need to get personally involved. Organisations also need to learn that activism should not be run like a business. There should not be a monopoly on helping a group of people. Conversely, in Islam, we are taught that the more people who join our cause in benefiting others, the better and more blessed our activism becomes. Therefore, organisations should view themselves as a bridge to facilitate the involvement of more individuals to get more individuals on the ground as well as other organisations to be involved in what they are doing. Everyone has a role to play, and we need to help our brothers and sisters find their roles in assisting others.

The second one is love. In Singapore, we speak many languages and one of the barriers that sometimes stops us from helping others is the fear of being unable

to convey how we feel and what we understand of our faith. Nevertheless, we need to understand that the language of the heart often overcomes the language of the tongue - and that is love. When the source of our actions is the love in our hearts, even being there physically in silence for a brother is beneficial. The most important thing is to take a leap of faith and reach out to those in need our help. Just like how converts and returning Muslims take a leap of faith to enter Islam, we need to meet them halfway and show them the beauty of the faith and our community.

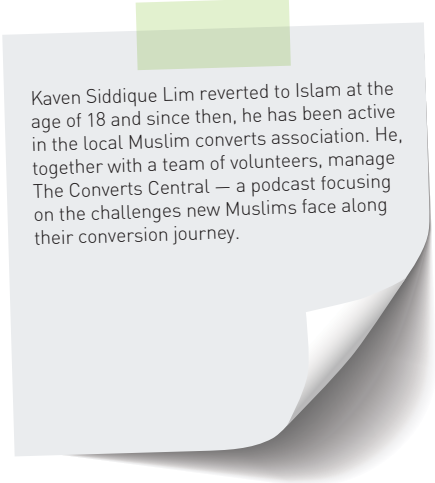
With these two, the beauty of our faith shines through. Our Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) first taught Islam through the language of love before anything else, and one of the first things that we come to learn of as Muslims is that our community is like parts of a body. He says “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever” (*Bukhari*). Only when we put these two pieces of the puzzle together can we then bring real benefit to the lives of the people around us.

I often think about and ask Allah *swt* this – why was I the beneficiary of so much love and kindness, sincere counsel and selfless support from so many people around me?

Through Converts Central, I realised that it was the experience of benefiting tremendously from these means of receiving Divine Love that had made me aware that this should not be an occurrence that is out of the ordinary. It should not take a fortunate Chinese Muslim convert to be in the right place, at the right time to experience such kindness. In fact, it is our duty to make it a right of all Muslims. I pray that this article serves as a means for me to fulfil my responsibility to pave the way for such change.

May Allah *swt* allow us to emulate the perfect beauty and character of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*), for

we are the ultimate beneficiaries of good character. The means and the rewards of good character are from Allah *swt*, and it is through hope and yearning for His Divine Mercy that we attain it. ■



Kaven Siddique Lim reverted to Islam at the age of 18 and since then, he has been active in the local Muslim converts association. He, together with a team of volunteers, manage The Converts Central — a podcast focusing on the challenges new Muslims face along their conversion journey.

TAKING FLIGHT TO TANZANIA WITH **MIRZA ANUAR AB MALEK**

BY NURUL MARDHIAH BTE OMAR



According to a survey by Boston Consulting Group and The Network in 2021, the top five destinations for international remote employment are the United States of America (USA), Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK). In an article by JobStreet published in 2022, the top countries where Singaporeans are seeking jobs are Australia, China, and the USA. On top of factors such as safety and language, many Singaporeans choose to migrate to these countries due to better career opportunities and easy assimilation into their respective culture.

However, what happens if you decide to take the unconventional route? For Mirza Anuar AB Malek, he managed to find his second home in Tanzania where he is pursuing a career as a field service representative in the aviation industry.

To him, working in the aviation industry is synonymous with travelling. As a self-professed wanderer, he jumped at the unique chance to move to Tanzania when offered, despite it being an uncommon destination for Singaporeans. Mirza shares with the *Karyawan* team his experience as a Singaporean Muslim there.

Q: Can you tell us more about yourself and your family?

Mirza: I enjoy travelling and being outdoors. So, it is no coincidence that I am in the aviation industry. Currently, my job requires me to travel 75% of the year and that suits me very well.

My family is wonderful. Due to school and work commitments, they cannot join me on assignments. My son is in secondary school and the MUM (My Ultimate Manager) is a research centre manager.

They keep me grounded. Being away from most of the time, the whole family provides stability in my life, especially on the home front. Thus, I am grateful for them.

Q: What does your job entail?

Mirza: I am with a multinational corporation that manufactures and services commercial aeroplanes. As part of the Field Service team, I work with the airline to improve their operations and practices.

This is accomplished through sharing technical knowledge and developing procedures to enhance safety and reliability. I am Singapore-based but the job requires a lot of travelling. An assignment may last up to 6 months if required.

Q: How did you enter this line of work? Could you share your educational background?

Mirza: I graduated from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with an Electrical and Electronics Engineering (EEE) Degree. I have always loved aviation so when there was a job opportunity to be a Licensed Aircraft Engineer, I jumped on it. Nothing beats working on an aircraft. That's the best way of understanding how the aircraft system works, by being hands-on. I got that privilege while working in Base and Line Maintenance.

Subsequently, with the invaluable experience gained, I took the challenge of being in a Maintenance Operations Control Centre and Fleet Management. You know, being in aviation enables you to explore the many different facets of the industry. The industry can offer many possible career paths. In addition to Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO), Airlines, the aviation industry includes Aircraft Manufacturers, Researchers and Air Safety Specialists.

Q: How long have you been working for? Have you always worked in Tanzania?

Mirza: I have been in this industry for 17 years. This is my first time in Tanzania. First time in Africa, in fact. I have been deployed to Guangzhou, New Delhi and Mumbai before this.



Mirza with his colleagues at work.

Q: Why did you choose to pursue a career as an aviation specialist in Tanzania? What are some of your career highlights?

Mirza: Being part of the Field Service team enables me to interact with people from different parts of the world. Not only with the customers but within the team also. The team comprises individuals from different countries, backgrounds and ages. Working with them is a privilege as I learn a lot from them concerning industry knowledge and invaluable life lessons. These are experiences that cannot be bought.

Q: What aspects and characteristics of Tanzania appealed to you (for your career and to live there)?

Mirza: I love the outdoors. When I heard I was being assigned to Tanzania, I was excited. Tanzania offers incredible cultural experiences, beautiful beaches and amazing wildlife encounters. You are not far away from the tallest peak in Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro, and trekking there and the nearby Mount Meru is enjoyable and scenic. There are islands like Zanzibar where the waters are perfect for snorkelling and diving. National parks like the Serengeti and Ngorongoro are the best places to see wildlife in Africa. Isn't it fantastic to have these in your backyard?

Q: How does working in Tanzania compare to working in Singapore? How did you adapt to the changes?

Mirza: I feel it takes additional time to commute to work. When there is bad weather, jams will happen. A journey to work can take 2 hours and it is only in the city. Preparations have to be made to leave early when bad weather is expected. I have been so pampered by the good road infrastructure and public transportation system we have in Singapore. It is so efficient.

Q: What should those who wish to work in Tanzania consider before settling down and working there?

Mirza: Driving is not for the faint of heart. That was a culture shock for me. You have to be mindful of the motorbikes (Boda Boda) and Tuk Tuk (Poa) squeezing next to and in front of you. You just have to be extra careful while on the roads.

Q: Where else have you worked and which country was the most challenging? How did you overcome the challenges?

Mirza: I have worked in Guangzhou, China, New Delhi and Mumbai in India. Usually, the language barrier will be the initial obstacle when relocating to a new country. I only speak English and Malay so communication while overseas can be challenging. What I'll do is get a book of



Lunch with friends at Dar Es Salaam

basic and useful phrases for travellers and develop a daily learning routine to put it into practice with people you meet. You may butcher the language initially and raise a few strangers' eyebrows but they will understand that you are trying your best. Practice makes perfect.

Q: What are some cultural differences between Singapore and Tanzania?

Mirza: The Tanzanians are friendly and welcoming. Just walking along the streets people will greet each other naturally. Hello / Mambo (How are you?). Poa (I'm good). Exchanging pleasantries are important. Handshakes are a must when you meet someone for the first time and interestingly, they often hold your hand and do not release it throughout the entire conversation.

Q: How do you spend your free time?

Mirza: There are two golf courses there in the city of Dar Es Salaam. I spend the weekends playing with friends and colleagues. In addition, there are many islands around. I take boat trips to Bongoyo and Mbudya to chill out at the beach and snorkel in the clear waters.

Q: As a Muslim working in Tanzania, are there any particular challenges you have faced? How did you overcome them?

Mirza: I am fortunate that 35% of the population in Dar Es Salaam are Muslims.

Halal food and mosques are easy to find. All the people of different races and religions interact freely in Tanzania. Within my team, my colleagues know I am a Muslim and they are respectful of my dietary restrictions and religious commitments. I will attend Friday prayers together with my Tanzanian counterparts at work.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

Mirza: To be a Permanent Base Representative. They serve as the single point of contact for the Airlines should they require support. I hope to be assigned to a specific base on a long-term basis, in hopefully an exotic location, and this time, with my family.

Q: Do you have any advice for Muslims in Singapore who are interested in pursuing a career overseas?

Mirza: Be open-minded. Take time to learn the customs and culture of that country. It can be difficult and you may experience some culture shock. Allow yourself to explore and connect to your new environment. It means a lot to the locals when you try to speak their language and engage in their customs. It is a great sign of respect.

It is a unique opportunity for individual and spiritual growth. You will learn a lot about yourself, your faith and your life in general. *Hakuna Matata* (No worries)! ■

“Be open-minded. Take time to learn the customs and culture of that country. It can be difficult and you may experience some culture shock. Allow yourself to explore and connect to your new environment. It means a lot to the locals when you try to speak their language and engage in their customs. It is a great sign of respect.”

Nurul Mardhiah Bte Omar is a Republic Polytechnic graduate with a Diploma in Mass Communications. She enjoys writing and creating content.

Suffian Hakim's novel, *The Keepers of Stories*, is a compelling tale that centres on the clashes between tradition and modernity, set in post-independence Singapore. *The Keepers of Stories* depicts the journey of two young siblings, Hakeem and Zulaika, and their encounter with the *Anak Bumi*—the Children of the Earth, a secret community at Changi Beach. Here, members of the community take turns to engage in a communal storytelling tradition, called the *Wayang Singa*, beneath the stars, reminiscent of the tales, legends, and histories passed on to them by their ancestors.

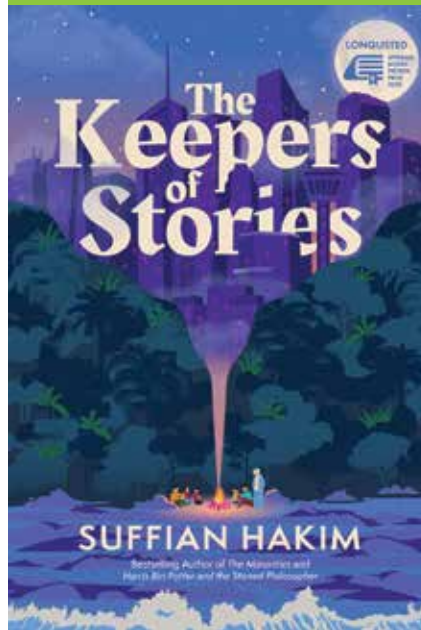
In an interview with *L'Officiel* magazine¹, Suffian remarked that he tapped on “a deep well of personal grief” for the book as he drew on the stories and imaginative anecdotes that were passed on to him by his late grandmother. In fact, the character of Nyai Timah in the novel, a strong-willed elderly woman who led and fiercely protected the *Anak Bumi* community, is largely based on Suffian's grandmother, someone whom he describes as having “a mind [that] was made of coruscating universes”. He went on to call her his very own Keeper of Stories.

TRADITION VS MODERNITY

The addition of mystical and otherworldly elements in the novel is reflected in the captivating combination of blue and purple hues on the cover page, the bushes providing a shield for the elderly woman and children against the towering skyscrapers and the gentle drift of campfire smoke merging in the air converge harmoniously, offering a narrative that bridges tradition with modernity and infused with an essence of mystique. This mirrors the magical journey to Changi Beach Hakeem and Zulaika embark on with their father in the novel as described in the following lines:

“The path they followed snaked into the trees, which grew denser and denser until it seemed almost improbable that they were near a beach. The trilling twilight-hymns of the forest became more pronounced than the roaring of the waves”.

Suffian creates an almost alternate reality with the conceptualisation of the *Anak*



Book Review SUFFIAN HAKIM'S THE KEEPERS OF STORIES

BY NABILAH SYAHIRAH

Bumi and the way they led their lives in a hidden part of Singapore, away from the bustling city life. At the heart of it, the existence of the *Anak Bumi* represents the fears and anxieties that Singaporeans faced in the early days of post-independent Singapore as they were forced to accommodate to the changes brought upon them by modernisation and urbanisation.

This is especially applicable in the context of the Singaporean Malay community in the early days of post-independence. In her paper, Shukarman opines that in view of the resettlement programme of the 1960s–1980s, “[Singaporean] Malays [were] forced out of their lands to be reconstituted into modern housing in the mainland”.² The physical displacement of the Malay community impacted them culturally, economically, and socially. This is a central theme in the works of Malay authors post-independence, such as Mohamed Latiff Mohamed and Suratman Markasan.

In Suffian's novel, we see the character of Nyai Timah, a matriarch who resists modernisation, rebelling against this displacement as she proclaims:

“My community is made of free people, free from the chains of modern society and city life. Here, they breathe the air of the Earth, not smog or sawdust. Here, they have a place to stay where they are accepted, where nobody but the Earth judges them.”

In these forceful lines, Nyai Timah clearly distinguishes the *Anak Bumi* from the rest of Singapore who accepted and adapted to the changes that were brought about by modernism. In a way, the *Wayang Singa* ritual could be viewed as a response to modern society as the *Anak Bumi* community takes an active stance in preserving and upholding their identity, tradition and culture that have been passed down across generations in a context where they are being removed from their land of origin.

The oral tradition of passing down tales through generations also stands in stark contrast to the current digital age, a result of modernism, where the internet serves as our collective knowledge repository. Today, we no longer trace these stories back to our ancestors. This fading away of oral tradition runs the risk of debasing the humane aspects of storytelling that connects the individual to his/her cultural heritage.

¹ Kang, H. (2021, July 26). Suffian Hakim draws from “a deep well of personal grief” for his latest book. *L'Officiel*. <https://www.lofficiel.com/culture/suffian-hakim-keepers-of-stories-harris-bin-potter>

² Shukarman, L. (2021). Narrating Displacement: Insights from the Singapore Malay Literati. *Academia*. https://www.academia.edu/33977468/Narrating_Displacement_Insights_From_The_Singapore_Malay_Literati_Without_Content_Page

Hence, the existence of the *Anak Bumi* community and the *Wayang Singa* in *The Keepers of Stories* serves as a parallel universe where all of these are subverted. It represents a reality where modernisation and urbanisation did not occur, a place where people are not subjugated to the demands and changes that these processes brought about.

THE WAYANG SINGA: STORIES WITHIN A STORY

Nyai Timah describes the *Wayang Singa* ritual in an almost sacred manner as she says: “We are the keepers of an ancient tradition – a tradition that has been passed down since the early ages of our people”.

Implied in these lines is the urge for the community to preserve and uphold not only the traditions that have kept them together but also the identity that unites them. This tradition of oral storytelling is a practice that is not alien to the Malay community in Singapore. The oral tradition of storytelling within the Malay community is deeply rooted in the transmission of tales, legends, and cultural heritage from one generation to another through spoken narratives.³ This tradition plays a significant role in preserving and sharing the rich history, values, and beliefs of the Malay culture.

In the Malay community, storytelling has been a fundamental means of education and entertainment for centuries. Elders would impart stories to the younger generations during gatherings, community events, or informal settings like family gatherings. In *The Keepers of Stories*, Suffian beautifully depicts this practice through the *Wayang Singa* storytelling ritual that affords every member of the *Anak Bumi* community an opportunity to narrate the stories that they have inherited from their ancestors. In an era where folktales are encountered in books or online, the *Wayang Singa* transports us to a time we might never have otherwise known.

The *Wayang Singa* could also be said to be a variation of a prominent form of oral storytelling in the Malay community which is the art of *Wayang Kulit* or shadow puppetry. This traditional performance involves intricate shadow puppets made of

leather, manipulated by a storyteller, who narrates stories from epics like the Ramayana or local folklore while casting shadows on a screen.⁴ This is referenced in Suffian’s novel through the character of Samy, an Indian man who belongs to the *Anak Bumi* community, as he shares the story of Ravana from the divine epic Ramayana in one of the chapters in the novel.

THE PERTINENCE OF THE ORAL TRADITION OF STORYTELLING TODAY

The Keepers of Stories reminds its readers of the continued relevance of the oral tradition of storytelling in current times. The following are several pertinent points on the importance of preserving spoken narratives extracted from the novel:

- **Perpetuating the *Kampung Spirit*: A Sense of Camaraderie**

“... with *Wayang Singa* in their hearts, [they] were never truly alone”.

The oral tradition of storytelling in the novel provides an avenue for the *Anak Bumi* to feel a sense of belonging to the community regardless of their backgrounds and heritage. A range of stories originating from different countries such as India, as narrated by Samy, the story of “Qilin and the First Son” from China, narrated by Mister William who is a Chinese surgeon, and a revised version of how Singapore was discovered by Sang Nila Utama can be found in the novel. The diverse range of narratives narrated by these individuals evokes the unique essence of the *kampung spirit*, a distinctive trait within Singaporean society.

- **Preservation of Culture, Tradition and Identity**

Another notable feature of the narrative would be the unifying chant that the members of the *Anak Bumi* community echoes each time the *Wayang Singa* ritual is about to begin.

The chant goes, “*Kami Anak Bumi; kami akar Bumi! We are the children of the Earth; we are rooted to the Earth! We will tell our stories, for our stories are the stuff of our souls! Kami pendengar dan penjaga hikayat kamu! We are the listeners and keepers of your stories!*”.

The chant possibly serves as a powerful cultural motif, connecting the characters to their heritage and the oral tradition. Embodying a ritualistic or ceremonial significance, the chant is likely to be passed down through generations within the *Anak Bumi* community. Through its significance, Suffian advocates for a community that values and sees the importance of culture and heritage, something that is made possible by the oral tradition of storytelling.

- **Uplifts in Times of Adversity**

Suffian embeds both religious and cultural elements through the use of intertextuality – stories within a story – in his novel. In doing so, he highlights the important role of drawing on familiar narratives that have been passed down through generations in times of adversity.

For instance, the tale of Buraq titled *Buraq’s Final Flight* in the novel intertwines the elements of myth, tradition, and cultural heritage within the narrative. Buraq, a mythical creature from the Islamic tradition, is often depicted as a winged horse with supernatural abilities. Through the tale of Buraq, not only does Suffian reiterate the power of storytelling as a means to preserve cultural identity and values, but he also highlights how this well-known mythical creature in the Islamic world symbolises hope, guidance, and a connection to something greater than oneself.

Suffian also references P. Ramlee, a celebrated actor, singer, songwriter and director in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in his novel through the story of *Bujang Lapok meets the Queen*. He skillfully adds a playful twist to this narrative through the merging of *Bujang Lapok*, the iconic comedic trio from the classic Singaporean Malay film series with the Queen of England. In doing so, Suffian evokes humour to create a light-hearted atmosphere at a time when Zulaika and her brother Hakeem were anxious about their father’s, Sujakon, safety. Once again, Suffian reminds us of how stories can uplift in times of adversity.

³ Abd Rahim, N. (2014). *The Nearly Forgotten Malay Folklore: Shall We Start with the Software?*, 13 (3). 216–221. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1034241.pdf>
⁴ Salleh, E. (2018, December). *Wayang Kulit*. *Singapore Infopedia*. <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=ac6436e3-6eef-41ad-a5b9-39400606896b>

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- **A Way to Immortalise Beings**

Finally, but more importantly, Suffian emphasises how stories are mediums in which human beings and pieces of the past can be immortalised. Just like how memories of his own grandmother are kept alive in his story, likewise, Nyai Timah is remembered in Hakeem's story years after the *Anak Bumi* community has dispersed. This is also echoed in Sujakon's last words to his children, "*Keep me in your stories*". This mirrors Suffian's attempt to keep alive the tradition of oral storytelling as well as cultural and religious elements that are specific to the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore through his novel.

Overall, Suffian Hakim's *The Keepers of Stories* is a poignant and engaging read that not only entertains but also prompts the reader to contemplate the value of tradition, storytelling, and cultural identity, more specifically amongst the Malay community, in modern Singapore. Suffian's ability to blend elements of contemporary fiction with a touch of magical realism and cultural exploration results in a story that is both engaging and thought-provoking. By seamlessly merging contemporary elements with cultural richness, *The Keepers of Stories* offers readers a unique and immersive experience that transcends traditional genre boundaries. This novel offers a breath of fresh air, particularly for younger readers who wish to embark on an adventure through the diverse tales nestled within its pages. ■

Nabilah Syahirah is an English Literature graduate from the National University of Singapore (NUS). She has completed her Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) at the National Institute of Education (NIE) and is presently undergoing teacher training at a local secondary school. Her dedication lies in fostering an appreciation for language and literature among students, aspiring to create an enriching and engaging educational sphere.



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