

# COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

## INTRODUCTION

The Community Advocates Panel consists of five panel members:

1. **Mohamad Hairil Johari**, member of AMP Singapore Board of Directors, and Senior Academy Officer at the Physical Education and Sports Teacher Academy of the Ministry of Education
2. **Nailul Hafiz**, CEO and Principal Consultant of Asian Leaders Institute
3. **Dr Walid Jumblatt Abdullah**, Assistant Professor at the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs in Nanyang Technological University (NTU)
4. **Nor Lastrina Hamid**, Sustainability Advocate and Co-Founder of Singapore Youth for Climate Action
5. **Nur Suliani Md Noor**, Co-Founder of Kowabunga! Global Pte Ltd

The panel members first convened in January 2022. They conducted extensive discussions and analysed the results from the Blackbox Perception Survey and sentiment analysis by My FinB, both of which were commissioned by AMP, and the Singapore Census of Population 2020 report to identify the various problems, issues, definitions, complexities, and personalities involved in the matter at hand.

Following the discussions and analysis, the Panel highlighted the following as this paper's main objective: **support for Muslim professionals to play more significant roles in strengthening communities.**

The secondary objective involves **encouraging Islamic values in promoting advocacy.** Before proceeding with discussing the objectives, it is worthwhile to discuss some fundamental questions:

- Who is a community advocate (CA)?
- Why does the community need more advocates?
- What are the different communities within the muslim community?
- What are Islamic values (the Panel is fully aware of the tensions between Muslims who have different ideological bents, each claiming to be closer to representing Islamic values)?

## Definition of Community Advocates

This paper considers a community advocate (CA) as someone who uses his or her voice and/or position to pursue the betterment of the Muslim community. In a way, every person is an advocate, in line with the Prophetic tradition that "Every one of you is a leader"<sup>1</sup>.

For this paper's purposes, however, advocates are those who explicitly champion causes for Muslims. The term "Muslim professionals" refers to individuals

<sup>1</sup>The *hadith* is reported in Sahih Muslim as follows: "Beware. Every one of you is a shepherd and every one is answerable with regard to his flock. The Caliph is a shepherd over the people and shall be questioned about his subjects (as to how he conducted their affairs). A man is a guardian over the members of his family and shall be questioned about them (as to how he looked after their physical and moral well-being). A woman is a guardian over the household of her husband and his children and shall be questioned about them (as to how she managed the household and brought up the children). A slave is a guardian over the property of his master and shall be questioned about it (as to how he safeguarded his trust). Beware, every one of you is a guardian and every one of you shall be questioned with regard to his trust." See: "Sahih Muslim, Book 18, Hadith 29a." *Sunnah.com*, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:1829a>. Accessed 1 August 2022.

who are successful in their respective fields and possess the capacity to advocate, support, and give back to the community; CAs are individuals who speak and work on issues and causes related to the local community.

It is not a requirement that these individuals or groups be attached to any Community and Muslim Organisations (CMO), as they can start their own ground-up initiatives<sup>2</sup>. A few sub-categories of advocates have been identified:



While the focus is on the first three categories, references will be made to political advocates – Muslim politicians – as and when necessary.

### The Need for Community Advocates

Why does the Muslim community in Singapore need advocates? It is the complex nature of modern and social life that no one can be an expert on everything. For instance, someone extremely well-versed in business dealings may be a novice in the socio-political scene. Having advocates who deal with various spheres of life concerning the Muslim community would be needed to fill in the knowledge-information gaps. Having more advocates would be useful for the following reasons:

1. There may be specifics that apply to Muslims which may not be particularly obvious to non-Muslim advocates. Business advocates, for instance, would have to contend with Islamically-sound and permissible ways; social advocates would have to consider the sentiments of various groups within the community, and so on.
2. The Panel strongly believes in the marketplace of ideas – the more advocates there are, the better the competition, and hence, the best ideas would emerge.

3. Practically, no single advocate, even within a sphere, can cover all the needs and aspirations of the people within that group.

### Diversity of the Muslim Community

From the outset, the Panel acknowledges that even the term “community” can be a contradiction. Within the Muslim faith there exist various “communities”, with multiple sub-identities under the umbrella of the “Muslim community”. These include:



#### RACE/LANGUAGE

Even though most Muslims in Singapore are Malays, a sizeable number are from other communities (Indian, Arab, and others).



#### CLASS

The various strata have completely different experiences, in some cases. The COVID-19 pandemic had brought this to the fore in the most apparent ways. One example would be when many upper/middle-class Singaporeans called for more restrictions and tighter measures because they could work from home, whereas those from the lower economic strata of society could not do so.



#### GENERATION

Just like in other communities, younger Muslims may or may not share similar ideational beliefs with their elder counterparts.



#### IDEOLOGY

- *Various denominations within the Muslims:* Sunni-Shia, but more significantly in our context, traditionalist/Sufi-Salafi
- *Liberal-conservative divide:* Of course, this is to be viewed as a spectrum and not as a dichotomy, but it is important to acknowledge the existence of vastly different views among Muslims to begin with

<sup>2</sup>Hamid, Nur Lastrina. “Strengthening the Role of Singapore Muslim Professionals in Community Advocacy.” *The Karyawan*, 15 July 2022.

To complicate matters, each individual is the sum of all their identities, hence it is not always easy to neatly categorise a person. At the same time, this results in two outcomes:

1. Their experiences may differ despite their commonality of being Muslim
2. What qualifies as "Islamic values" may greatly differ among Muslims

As such, when discussing the sub-objective of encouraging Islamic values in promoting advocacy, a minimalist understanding of Islamic values is recommended – one that allows more inclusivity of the various strands of Islamic understandings.

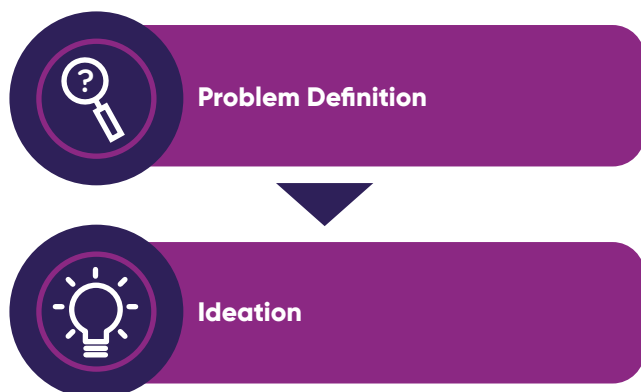
Essentially, this study analysed values which are acceptable to Muslims across the ideological spectrum. This principle was also applied to advocates with different ideological bents in discussions.

The Panel acknowledges that the choice of Muslim professionals as the unit of analysis for the main objective is a little restrictive since they are part of the upper/middle-income category. However, it is maintained as a gauge for the paper.

The Panel further emphasises that the Islamic values to be discussed will be useful for advocates.

## Paper Outline

This paper adopts a qualitative approach conducted in two phases:



The initial phase was designed to accurately define the scope. It aimed to identify challenges impeding Muslim professionals from enacting more effective community advocacy, and to outline inclusivist Islamic values.

The findings were analysed and used to develop problem statements and questions for the ideation phase. Subsequently, the ideation phase was designed to identify potential solutions to the defined problem statements.

The subsequent sections will outline the methodology, findings, and recommendations of each phase.

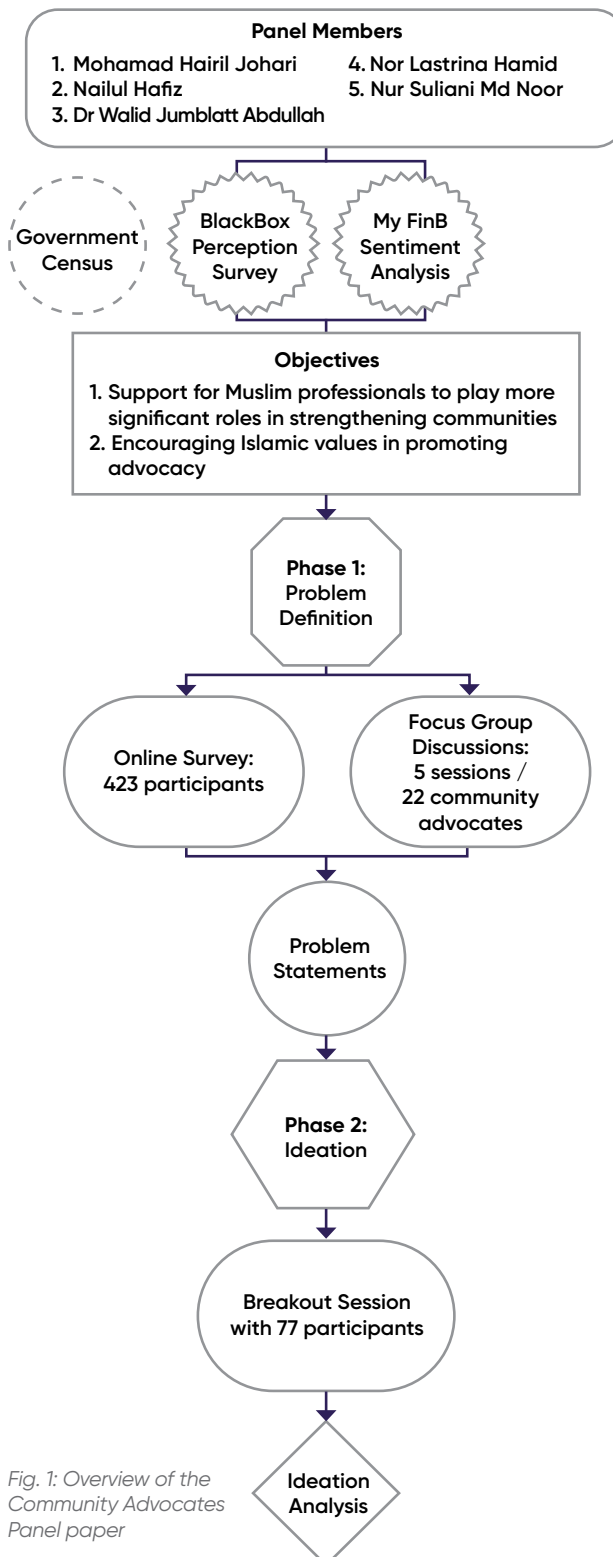


Fig. 1: Overview of the Community Advocates Panel paper

## **PROBLEM DEFINITION**

To accurately scope the problems faced by Singaporean Muslims in pursuing and executing advocacy work, an online survey and five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. This process was necessary to avoid analyses that may be projections and therefore out of touch with actual ground realities. This section will outline the methodology, its key findings, and the problem statements derived therefrom.

### **Methodology**

#### **Online Survey**

Convenience sampling was applied for the online survey, involving 432 respondents. The Panel is aware of the drawbacks of this method; however, the number of participants is believed to be large enough to mitigate the method's shortcomings.

The majority of respondents had at least a Diploma or above (86.1%). Income levels were diverse, although the majority had a household income of \$3,000–\$4,999. In terms of gender, 52.3% of respondents were male and 47.7% were female.

Survey questions were constructed to explore current perceptions of the Muslim community about relevant aspects of community advocacy in Singapore. The questions were categorised into nine thematic sections:

1. Basic personal information
2. Changing values
3. Defining "success"
4. Giving back to the community
5. Community and Muslim Organisations (CMOs)
6. Community advocacy
7. Social media
8. Role of women
9. Future of the community

#### **Focus Group Discussions**

Five FGDs involving a total of 22 community advocates (CAs) were conducted. Muslim advocates selected were from different ideological groups and had in-depth understanding of the communities in which they operate. Each session

was with four to six advocates, lasting for about two hours. The following themes were discussed:

- The role of community/Islamic values in community advocacy
- Strengthening the role of Muslim professionals in community advocacy
- The role and impact of social media in community advocacy
- The role of women in community advocacy

### **Key Findings**

#### **Online Survey Results**

1. While 39% believed that things have generally improved for the community in the last five years, 36% believed things have stayed the same; 25% believed things have become worse.
2. While 64% were slightly optimistic about the future of the community in the next five years, 17% were very optimistic, and 19% were not optimistic.
3. At least 66.7% of respondents perceived the following values to be traditional community/Islamic values: strong family ties; respect for elders; moderation; religiosity/strong religious faith; humbleness; avoiding immoral acts; and giving back to the community. Furthermore:
  - An overwhelming proportion (over 72%) perceived family ties; respect for elders; religiosity/strong religious faith; humbleness and avoiding immoral acts as traditional community/Islamic values.
  - Approximately 42% of respondents felt that the weakening of religiosity/faith were the two most concerning trends.
4. Respondents were most concerned with the weakening of religiosity/faith, followed by the weakening of strong family ties and the decreasing respect for elders.
5. Identified as key values were strong family ties; giving back to the community; and strong religious faith. These values were perceived to help the community progress and/or succeed in the future.

- Although approximately 42% believed that none of the Islamic values actually hinder progress, some 23% felt that values such as religiosity, avoiding immoral acts and observing traditions have hindered progress, to some extent.
- Almost all respondents (95.8%) believed it is important to give back to the community (53.7% strongly agree, 42.1% agree), with 76.1% agreeing that the community still values doing so.
- On whether there are sufficient opportunities to do so, 72.2% affirmed so.
- While 43% of them serve the community through monetary donations, 25% do it through volunteerism; 17% through food distributions; and 14% through mentorship (Figure 2).

### Serving the Community

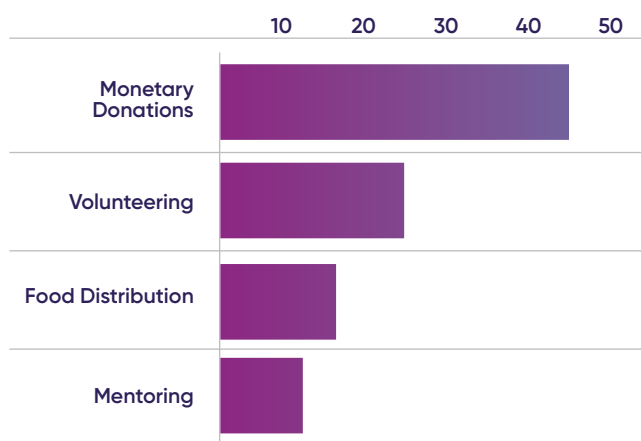


Fig. 2: Percentage of participation in community service

- The majority were likely to do so seasonally or monthly, and would usually serve the community through personal networks and other non-profits in equal proportions, followed by Community and Muslim Organisations (CMOs) and mosques in almost equal proportions as well.
- When asked about areas in which CMOs have been most effective in, 60.4% felt that they have been effective in providing initiatives to the community that target their needs; 40.5% felt that they have been effective in providing religious guidance for the community; 39.4% in collaborating with one another to benefit the community; 29.3% in providing a voice for the community; 25.7% in providing thought

leadership for the community; 21.3% in influencing government decisions.

### Muslim Organisation's Area of Effectiveness

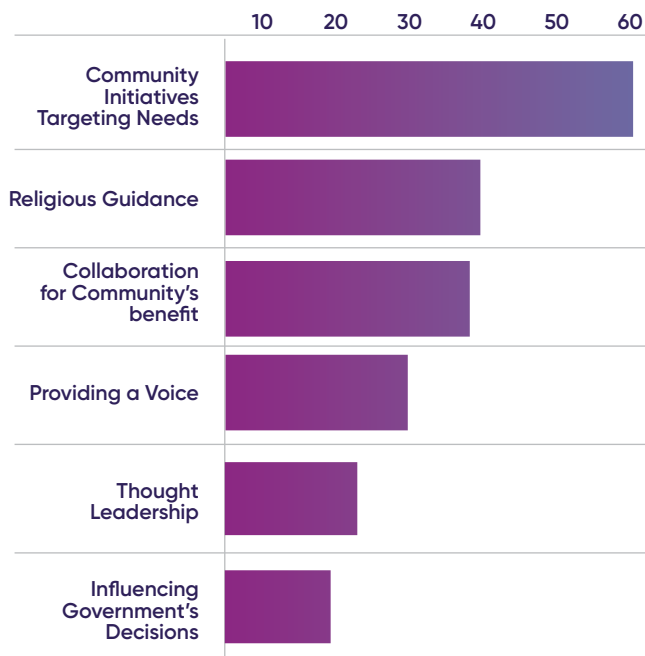


Fig. 3: Perception of Muslim organisations' effectiveness in different areas

- Two key areas which respondents believed CMOs should improve the most were in providing a voice for the community and in influencing government decisions, followed by – in equal proportions – collaborating with others to positively influence the community, as well as providing thought leadership to the community.
- An overwhelming majority of respondents (87.7%) felt that community advocates (CAs) and political leaders are equally important in bringing about positive change, and ought to work together for the best possible outcome (85.9%).
- Some 57.4% of respondents believed there is sufficient talent to ensure a renewal of high quality CAs.
- Also, 33.6% believed there are enough Muslims stepping up to advocate for the community; 35.2% remained neutral; 31.2% disagreed.

### Focus Group Discussion Findings

#### Islamic values:

- These values are typically universal, but, for the advocates, what distinguishes one value from

another is purpose, which is the execution of values for the sake of the one true God.

- Values such as justice, integrity, accountability, wisdom, patience, empathy, selflessness, and hope should be at the forefront of the advocate's work.
- A Muslim should be emotionally and spiritually resilient.
- More critical thinking among Muslims is needed.

**Muslim professionals' involvement in advocacy:**

- Muslim professionals do not join CMOs for various reasons.
  - Time
  - Perceptions of them being in an old boys'/ girls' club

**Women as CAs:**

- Many institutional/cultural barriers exist for women, influencing their decisions to become CAs.
  - Husbands need to support their wives more.
  - There is a need for more male allies.
- More women are needed on the Board of Directors (BODs) for CMOs and also other organisations.

**Problems facing CAs or potential CAs:**

- Culture of paranoia
  - People are afraid to be known as an "activist" because of fear of political reprisal
- Tendency for concerns to be dismissed by those in authority
  - "Oh this is not a problem in Singapore."
- Internalisation of stereotypes within the community may affect advocacy.

**Social media:**

- A great tool for advocacy
- We must be mindful of the pitfalls of social media
  - Narcissism, self-aggrandisement
  - Antagonistic behaviours
  - Echo chambers

**A perpetual issue:**

- How broad should our spectrum of acceptability be?

**PROBLEM STATEMENTS**

To define the problem statements for this paper, an analysis of the above findings was conducted. The discussion on this analysis can be found in Appendix A titled *Community Advocates Panel Problem Definition Phase – Discussion of Findings*. Through this analytical process, five problem statements were outlined, and two themes emerged: **Barriers Against Community Advocacy** and **Advocacy on Social Media**. The following are the problem statements and respective ideation questions:

**THEME 1:  
Barriers Against Community Advocacy**

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

**1**

The Muslim community in Singapore perceives a need for more CAs. However, factors such as lack of time, perceptions of rigidity in CMOs and fear of reprisals hinder Muslim professionals from stepping forward.

**Guiding Questions during Ideation**

**How do we overcome these personal and perceived barriers (e.g., lack of time, desire for autonomy, and rigidity in Community and Muslim Organisations (CMOs)) to encourage greater participation among Muslim professionals in community advocacy?**

**What Islamic values should be promoted in strengthening advocacy among Muslim professionals, and how should they be introduced and implemented?**

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

2

Muslim women today carry the burden of multiple socio-cultural expectations: being expected to work while juggling responsibilities at home. There is also some negative perception towards women who choose to be homemakers. These expectations hinder their effective participation in community advocacy.

**Guiding Questions during Ideation**

How can society support women's decisions in engaging in community advocacy?

Can Islamic values be used to redefine/navigate cultural and societal expectations of Muslim women?

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

2

The design of social media may cause individuals to remain in their own circles, engaging mostly like-minded individuals. This may hinder constructive discussions on complex issues that cross diverse interest groups.

**Guiding Questions during Ideation**

How can we overcome echo chambers to unite the community on complex and potentially divisive issues?

Which Islamic values can be encouraged to overcome these issues, and how?

**THEME 2:**

**Advocacy on Social Media**

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

1

Social media provides an environment that breeds narcissism – an inflated sense of self-importance and entitlement – potentially affecting how advocacy is carried out. As a result, individuals may be more interested in social media likes and shares rather than actual advocacy work.

**Guiding Questions during Ideation**

How do we encourage effective advocacy on social media despite this challenge?

Which Islamic values can be encouraged to overcome these issues, and how?

How do we build on the strengths of Community Advocates (CAs) using social media in Singapore?

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

3

There is a lack of *adab* or etiquette when conversing online. There is a need to "agree to disagree" and be "passionate without being disrespectful" to have constructive discussions.

**Guiding Questions during Ideation**

How can we foster the culture of respectful and constructive online engagements?

Which Islamic values can be encouraged to overcome these issues, and how?

The above problem statements were addressed at the ideation phase.

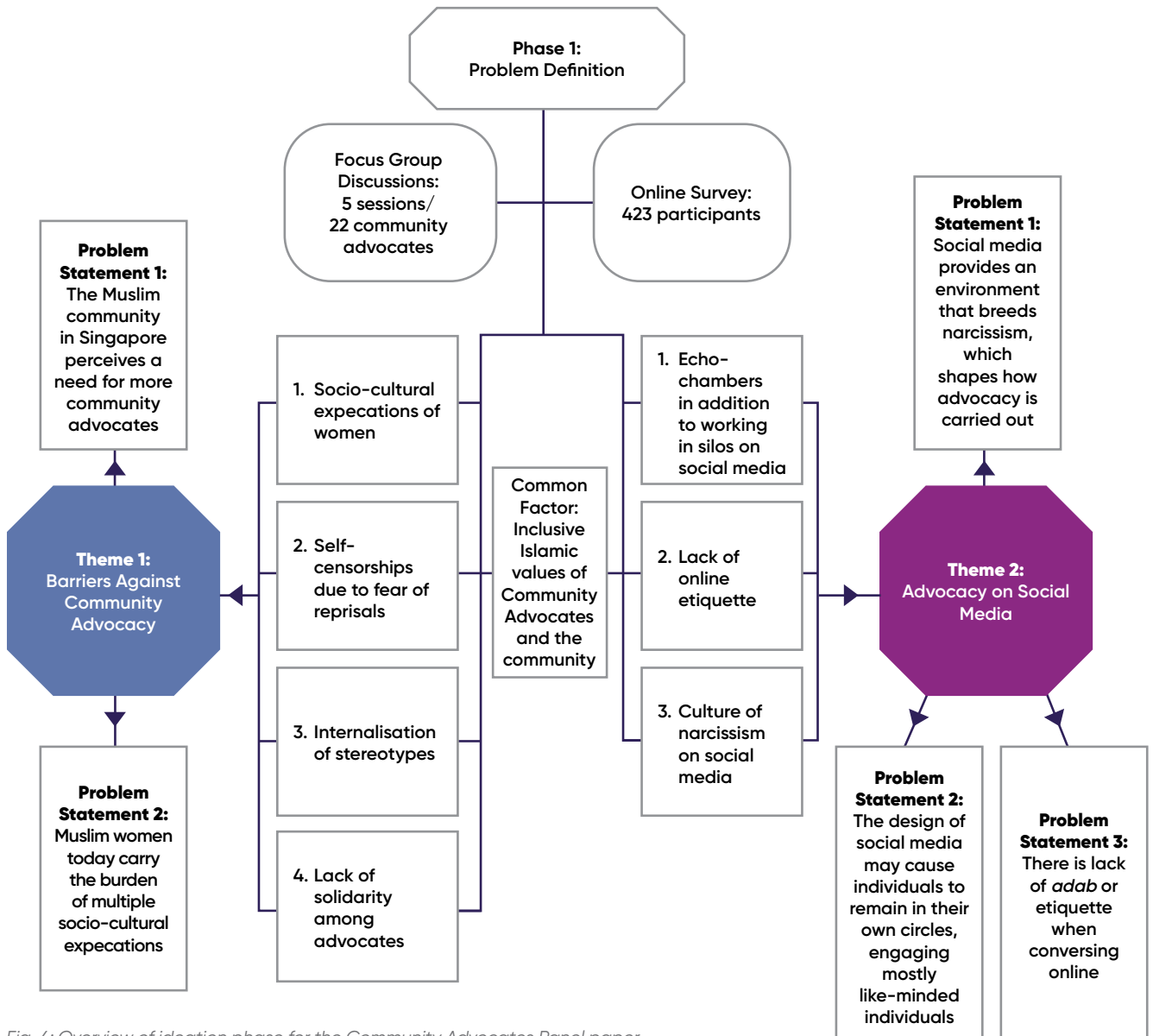


Fig. 4: Overview of ideation phase for the Community Advocates Panel paper

## IDEATION

To identify potential solutions to the defined problem statements, a breakout session was conducted. This section will outline the session's methodology, key findings, and ideation analysis.

### Breakout Session Methodology

A total of 77 people participated in this panel's breakout session. Participants were divided into

two groups and seated in tables of seven. Group A ideated on theme 1 and group B ideated on theme 2. Each table was assigned a facilitator and a scribe. Participants were briefed on key information pertaining to the problem statements and ideated for approximately two hours.



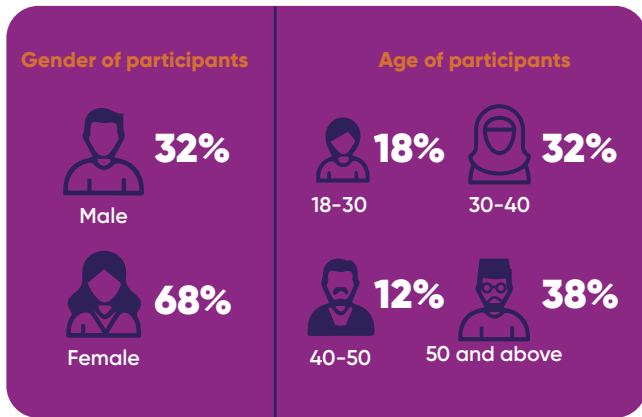


Fig. 5: Demographic information of breakout session participants

The ideation process for each problem statement included four phases:

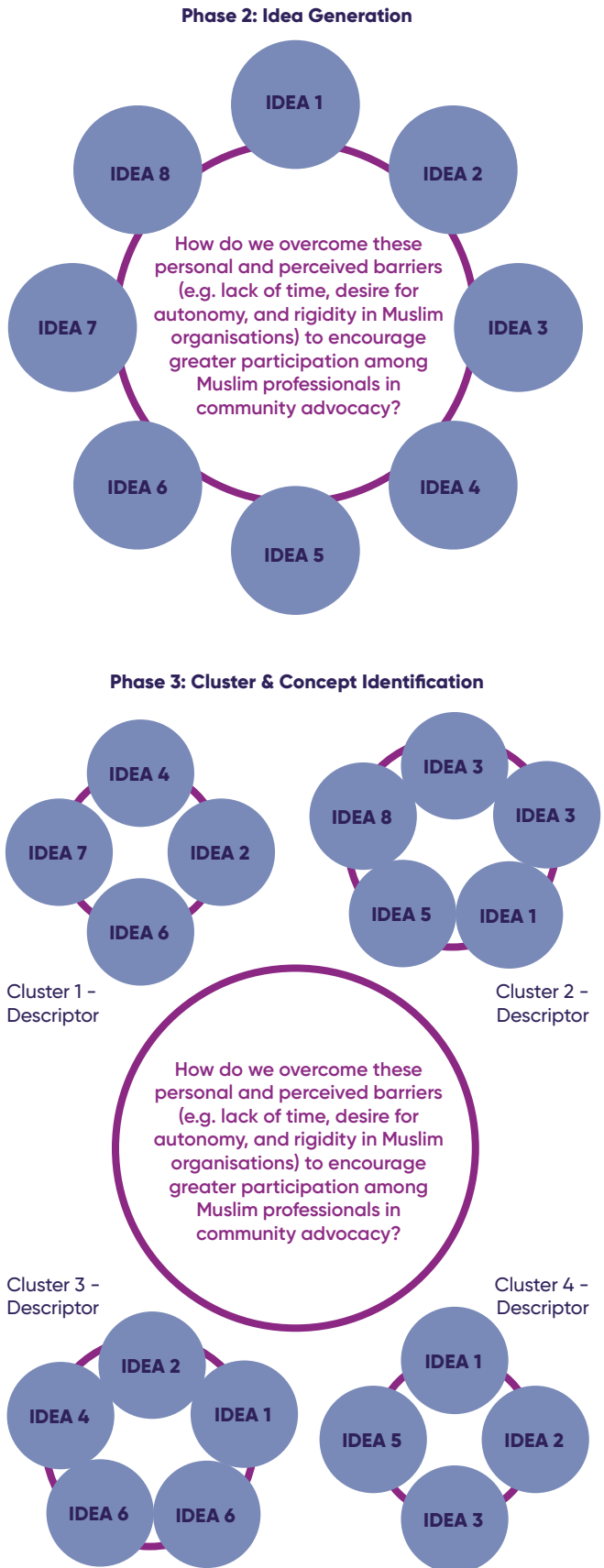
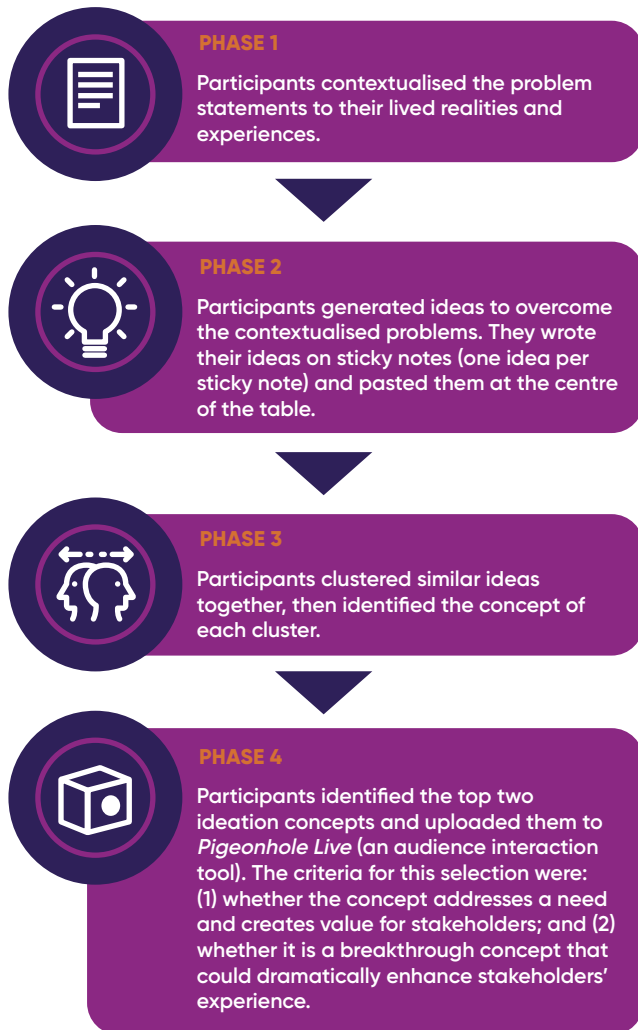


Fig. 6: Phase 2 and Phase 3 ideation process

## Barriers Against Community Advocacy

### PROBLEM STATEMENT 1:

The Muslim community in Singapore perceives a need for more community advocates (CAs). However, factors such as lack of time, perceptions of rigidity in Community and Muslim Organisations (CMOs) and fear of reprisals hinder Muslim professionals from stepping forward.

Three forms of barriers against community advocacy were derived from this problem statement: structural, perceptual and individual barriers.

### 1. Structural Barriers

**Institutional Barriers** - the need for self-censorship and strategic advocacy in Singapore has led to a lack of visible advocacy work – this reduces youths' accessibility to role models, mentorship, and inspiration. The issue of over-regulation in advocacy work was also mentioned. Participants highlighted the need for more effective reconciliation between maintaining transparency (to prevent misuse of funds/corruption) and protecting the dignity of beneficiaries.

**CMO Rigidity** - three main problems surrounding rigidity within Muslim Organisations were identified:

- 1) Their programmes and outreach do not include enough extrinsic motivation for youths; they do not sufficiently add value to the lives of youths.
- 2) There is an issue of stagnancy due to old leadership styles (top-down approach); inertia against innovation and structural changes; and the lack of understanding on the present needs of the community, its demographics, and overall outlook.
- 3) Inadequate successor planning: new leaders do not receive adequate mentoring to develop a strong foundation of ground experiences; spiritual, mental and physical health; and stable finances.

**Infrastructure of Advocacy Space** - five areas of infrastructure weaknesses were identified:

- 1) There is an absence of a centralised system – many advocates work in silos or in closed communities; absence of a database of expertise; lack of inter-advocate communication; and lack of resource sharing.
- 2) The current conceptualisation of volunteer work does not cater to the expertise and needs of individuals at different points in life.
- 3) There is a lack of support for CAs in areas such as employment policies, financial resources and childminding services.
- 4) There is insufficient representation of Muslim advocates in non-Muslim organisations to represent the needs of the community, for co-learning, and to access a larger pool of resources.
- 5) There is inadequate engagement with youths – a lack of diversity in youths engaged, and insufficient visible role models and mentors for youths.

### 2. Perceptual Barriers

**Absence of Islamic Worldview** - participants highlighted the lack of meaningful understanding of advocacy work through the Islamic lens. Due in part to superficial knowledge of the Islamic worldview/belief system beyond the "what" knowledge (lack of "why" knowledge), i.e., the lack of emphasis on the *aqidah* (*imaan* – conviction) aspect of Islam (soul of Islam) and an overemphasis on the *ibadah*/ritual practices aspect of Islam, there was a resounding emphasis on the connection between sound Islamic worldview/belief system, correct intentions, and more effective and enduring advocacy involvement.

**Stigma of Incentivising Community Advocacy** - Misuse of the concept of *lillahi ta'ala* was also observed, i.e., advocates have been told they should do advocacy work for the sake of Allah alone and expect only rewards from Him. Hence, they should accept low financial compensation and should not set financial expectations.

### Concept of Time, Credibility and Accountability

- the concept of time being limited and insufficient (leading to community advocacy being low on the priority list); the belief that an individual can only become a CA after attaining "credibility"; and the internalisation of accountability to the powerful rather than to the powerless.

**Mental Barriers** - there are rife misconceptions on the causes of poverty - the myth of meritocracy, a lack of reconciliation between the worldviews of the majority and minority groups in Singapore (a lack of appreciation for the differences), and the baggage of being Malays (internalisation of the "lazy" narrative and Islamophobia, leading to apologist and self-censorship behaviour).

Participants also emphasised Singaporeans' survival mentality as a key psychological impediment. Singaporeans' hyperfocus on establishing financial stability (due to Singapore's high cost of living) prevents them from prioritising the time and energy needed for advocacy work.

### 3. Individual Barriers

**Lack of Advocacy Skill Sets** - participants also attributed the lack of relevant skill sets as another barrier against effective advocacy within the community. For example, CAs have inadequate analytical skills; volunteer management skills; awareness and knowledge of stakeholders; and fundraising skills.

**Absence of Openness** - absence of a co-learning mindset was also observed. Consultation practices within CMOs and between advocates tend to lean towards tokenistic practices without a genuine desire to listen and learn. This is in part due to an enduring top-down management approach and inadequate implementation of *musyawarah* (consultative) values.

**Inadequate Knowledge to Navigate the Civic Space** - the absence of a centralised system results in many CAs receiving inadequate training to effectively manoeuvre the civic space. What is the boundary of tolerance in Singapore? What will be considered safe and risky? This ignorance causes heightened self-censorship.



## IDEATION ANALYSIS

How do we overcome these barriers (e.g., lack of time, desire for autonomy, and rigidity in CMOs) to encourage greater participation among Muslim professionals in community advocacy? What Islamic values should be promoted in strengthening advocacy among Muslim professionals, and how should they be introduced and implemented?

Ideas generated by participants during the breakout session can be thematised into two categories: perceptual change and structural change.

### 1. Perceptual Change

**Re-branding CMOs from "self-help" to "community touchpoint"** - CMOs should be rebranded as community touchpoint organisations (rather than self-help organisations) that advocate for the needs of the Muslim community. This is to overcome the "lazy" narrative, myth of meritocracy, crutch mentality and the suppressive moral judgement over CMOs' inability to help the community get out of dire circumstances. Hence, the change involves rechanneling CMOs' purpose from saving the community to uplifting the community.

**Create awareness/campaigns on the nuances and intersectionality of problems faced by the Muslim community in Singapore** - to overcome the community's superficial understanding of poverty, an outline of the specific help and resources (manpower, financial and expertise) for the community to uplift itself and overcome these circumstances should be made. There should be a complete removal of stigma surrounding poverty, and an emphasis on positive language usage and framing of individuals who are either mentally or structurally trapped in poverty cycle. Campaigns should

be created with actual and nuanced representation of the community and must avoid any stereotypical branding/narrative of the Muslim community.

**Reframe understanding of community advocacy and life priorities according to Islamic worldview** - creating a syllabus and conducting awareness campaigns and workshops/trainings can lead to the following:

- The Islamic belief system shapes intention. The correct perspective and intention will lead to effective advocacy actions.
- Reframing the understanding of community advocacy as a responsibility of all Muslims rather than being a volunteer service provides intrinsic motivation to persist in community advocacy.
- Reframing the understanding of time and financial resources as *rizq* (resources) from Allah, and with *barakah* (blessings), there will always be enough for everything.
- Contextualising Islamic values to Singapore's contemporary landscape and instilling them in CAs as part of character development. These values include reliance on Allah, humility, wisdom, mercy, compassion, empathy, patience, resilience, diligence, openness to learning and resource sharing, and *musyawarah* (consultative behaviour – a meaningful implementation, not tokenistic).
- Strengthening families with Islamic values. Strengthening the core of the community creates a sustainable support system for CAs and stabilises the community.

## 2. Structural Change

**Develop a holistic ecosystem for community advocacy and CA development**

- Research (ground-sensing) – determine what issues the Muslim community (at different stages of life) is passionate about
- Create a purpose-driven advocacy environment – the Islamic belief system must be the soul of all CMOs and Muslim CAs
- Remove the stigma of incentivising advocacy work – provide competitive pay, create a progressive wage system, and create financial stability for advocates to ensure sustainable advocacy work
- Develop a dignity-based approach in advocacy work, especially in community organisations – develop a culture of “accountability to the powerless” rather than “accountability to the powerful”. Review the bureaucratic process – provide allowance for case-by-case off-the-record advocacy work for sensitive communities.
- Scout and create cells of CAs with incremental levels of responsibilities to create progressive training and development opportunities – create a life cycle of advocacy opportunities for people at various ages and stages of life, catered to their unique capacities, needs, and interests.
- Engage them from young (it may be too late to attract and sustain youths in advocacy work after their diploma studies), touch their hearts, and provide mentorship programmes – create succession planning and knowledge management systems. Select youth leaders and train them – ensure they have adequate spiritual, psychological, physical, intellectual, emotional, and financial capacity.
- Develop and conduct masterclass programmes to train CAs and improve their skill sets – this should include Islamic worldview and

value inculcations; survey skills; volunteer engagement; training and management; knowledge of stakeholders and Singapore's civic space (tolerance levels, risks, legalities); analysis of policies and their philosophical underpinnings; branding; campaigning; fundraising; financial management; research skills; case study analysis of success stories and models of effective advocacy work. Experts should be hired to conduct sessions and share their knowledge.

- Develop a Muslim advocacy economic network to create financial independence. It is pertinent to develop the community's flow of money (endowments).
- Define call for actions – CMOs or community advocacy leaders should list out key issues faced by the community and formulate specific call-to-actions for the public.

***Establish a body dedicated to encouraging and coordinating collaborations between Muslim CAs and CMOs***

- Create a database/online repository of all Muslim CAs, CMOs, and non-Muslim community organisations – it should include information of causes and resources (financial, manpower, and expertise).
- Create visibility for Muslim CAs – raise the profiles of Muslim CAs and CMOs. Highlight profiles of non-Malay Muslim CAs and CMOs specifically, group like-minded CAs/CMOs and present them as a collective front, celebrate their successes, and encourage collaborations. Visibility should also be targeted to inspire and provide role models for Muslim youths.
- Direct people with specific expertise towards causes they can champion – place the right people at the

right place to create effective use of resources.

- Facilitate dialogues and discussions for CAs and CMOs to strategise, share common steps and avoid unnecessary duplications. Provide networking opportunities for established CMOs to partner with ground-up initiatives to co-learn and share resources.
- Facilitate safe and in-depth dialogues and discussions between established CMOs/Muslim CAs and members of the public to highlight and tackle gaps and problems in advocacy work without worrying about being gaslighted or facing reprisals.
- Create programmes for Muslim CAs to work in non-Muslim organisations to learn from their expertise, champion and create awareness of the Muslim community, and tap their resources for the community's needs. Invite non-Muslim CAs to brainstorming sessions to encourage co-learning and prevent block thinking/echo chambers.

Enhance the civic space by nurturing a healthy contestation of ideas:

- The Government should encourage and incentivise advocacy work – provide financial grants and resources to all advocacy groups, even those that advocate contesting ideas.
- Enhance communication between the government and CAs regarding ground reality so that adequate resources are provided – increase transparency with regard to causes or needs that are beyond the capacity of CMOs, which should be undertaken at the national level. Invite political leaders (especially Muslim political leaders) to ground-up initiatives and informal in-depth discussions to understand ground reality.
- CAs should analyse the underlying assumptions of national policies and

question whether the assumptions are true or are based on false presumptions.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT 2:

Muslim women today carry the burden of multiple socio-cultural expectations: being expected to work while juggling responsibilities at home. There is also some negative perception towards women who choose to be homemakers. These expectations hinder their effective participation in community advocacy.

Three core impediments affecting Muslim women's agency in advocacy work were derived: structural barriers, patriarchal mindset, and misconception of religiosity.

#### 1. Structural Barriers

**Inadequate infrastructure facilitating women's active presence in the community advocacy space** – participants surfaced the problem of CMOs and non-Muslim Organisations not catering to the unique needs of women, thereby excluding women from these spaces.

**Inadequate engagement** with women who are homemakers.

**Inadequate capacity** – participants also emphasised the importance of internal capacity. Muslim women cannot participate in advocacy work if their capacity is already fully utilised, i.e., they are already mentally and/or physically drained. There is inadequate education for women to optimise personal resources (mental and physical energy) and insufficient support to optimise the management of said resources.

#### 2. Patriarchal Mindset

**Insufficient understanding and appreciation of the differences between men and women** in thought processes, biologically, etc., and the importance of embracing these differences in nation building. This leads to inadequate facilitation and optimisation of the differences, and the exclusion of women from community spaces.

**Absence of meaningful understanding and appreciation of "feminine" duties** – participants also voiced concern over the continued existence of condescension towards household and caretaking responsibilities, and women's general position in society. This condescension creates ignorance of the importance of "feminine duties" in nation building. The persisting mindset leads to lack of recognition, appreciation, and facilitation for the work women do – both as homemakers and as career women.

**Women's internalisation of gender roles, gender-appropriate careers, and the honour of being a "superwoman"** (the internalised belief that women must be capable of doing everything, and tolerate intense physical, mental, and emotional pain) – this internalisation is further exacerbated by the existence of punitive consequences to gender non-conformity. This is problematic as it compromises the well-being of women and hinders their participation in community and nation building.

**Imbalance in social and financial roles between husbands and wives creates a cycle of trauma** – unhealthy dynamics between spouses lead to compromised mental health. Such dynamics affect children by transferring or creating new traumas. This in turn creates a new cycle of inherited internalisation of unhealthy or even abusive dynamics between spouses.

**Government policies, family law, social work, and foster systems are still built upon patriarchy** (unchallenged philosophical underpinnings) – there are observations that solutions proposed still largely focus on the mother's and not the father's role in the family, or on the traditional male and female roles/behaviours. This undermines the process of creating effective solutions to support families.

#### 3. Misconception of Religiosity

**Superficial/inadequate understanding of prophetic tradition** surrounding treatment of women – participants resoundingly voiced concerns over the community's lack of understanding of the importance and method of treating women with kindness, and the lack of exposure to the lives and roles played by the Prophet's wives, female companions, and

prominent female figures (such as scholars) in Islamic history. The superficial understanding of Islam led to misconstrued ideas of Islamic teachings, and the inability to differentiate between culture and Islam.

**Framing of women's religiosity being tied to commitment to the home** – participants made an observation linking the unrealistic expectation towards women to the community's mixed internalisation of the concept of a modern Muslimah (the view that women must financially contribute and have careers) and the misconception of equating women's religiosity to their fulfilment of "feminine duties".



## IDEATION ANALYSIS

How can society support women's decisions in engaging in community advocacy? Can Islamic values be used to redefine/navigate cultural and societal expectations of Muslim women?

Ideas generated by participants in response to these questions can be thematised into three categories: paradigm shifts, infrastructure support, and education/trainings.

**1. Paradigm shifts in views on women and "feminine duties". Awareness and appreciation campaigns on unique female strengths** – the campaigns should include the importance of motherhood to society and may utilise Ibn Khaldun's theory of socialisation: the character of every individual is the product of their socialisation, and the primary socialisation of children are their mothers. Healthy socialisation results in healthy Muslims (intellectually, spiritually, psychologically, and morally), who in turn form strong family institutions. This lays the foundation for a healthy Muslim community, enabling significant participation in nation building. The

campaigns should also include the necessity of unique female strengths in other areas of nation building, and substantiate the concept with examples of women's contributions in developing societies.

**Awareness and appreciation campaigns on "feminine duties"** should:

- rebrand the concept of "feminine duties" – household management, raising children, and caregiving – to "invisible labour"
- detail the work involved and the psychological and physical investment required
- outline its importance to nation building
- conceptualise them as another form of community advocacy. The campaigns should also highlight the importance of sharing these responsibilities between male and female family members in Singapore's current context.

**Campaigns, conversations and Friday sermons for men with an Islamic lens**

– outline clear steps on how to better support, appreciate, and respect women and specify misogynistic behaviour among men. Include the necessity of a collective effort between men and women in creating a healthier space for women in the advocacy space and in society at large.

**Engage men in places of influence to advocate and model paradigm shifts**

to acknowledge and address the male ego issue, and make deliberate efforts to be open-minded, supportive, and accommodating to women's agency in work and life choices despite personal discomforts, especially in advocacy

spaces, where such accommodations would lead to greater benefits to the community.

**Organise education campaigns on how to create change** – simple and concise steps on how men and women can facilitate women in exercising their agency and accessing community advocacy.

## 2. Infrastructure to support access and sustainability in advocacy work

**Create policies (at the national and CMO levels) and infrastructure** accommodating the different needs of women – different health needs; motherhood (especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding) – and facilitating men to become equal partners in household and caregiving duties, such as providing flexible and task-oriented working environments, equal paternity and maternity annual leave, childcare services, resting areas, etc.

**Define alternative sources of income for homemakers** beyond home-based businesses (HBB) and multi-level marketing (MLM) businesses and create policies to provide women with safety nets to re-access the job market if they want to, for example, by partnering with firms to match women to jobs. This can help financially strengthen families whose circumstances do not allow working outside of home; increase accessibility to spaces outside of home, and create a healthier, more balanced environment for homemakers to manage their capacities and well-being.

**Increase accessibility of resources (including information) to women** – greater awareness of available programmes/initiatives, especially women-led initiatives.

**Human libraries for role modelling** create visibility of different choices made by women and the type of advocacy work they do. Move away from gimmicky storytelling but present honest and raw struggles, so that women may learn from these stories. Create mentorship programmes for young women.

**Programmes engaging homemakers** – these events should be developed in accordance with homemakers' needs and interests, and accommodate children or include child-minding services, etc. They should also include both physical and virtual programmes as well as those that educate husbands and boys (from young) on a more balanced sharing of household/caregiving responsibilities.

## 3. Education and trainings to supplement paradigm shifts in views on women and "feminine duties"

**Programmes training couples to outline, communicate, and negotiate roles and responsibilities in marriage**

- Household responsibilities of husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters
- The importance of finding balance and its impact on psychological health and the importance of maintaining psychological health
- Knowledge of the differences between male and female perspectives/needs, and the male and female egos
- Promoting a focus on the framework of collaborative partnership between husbands and wives

**In-depth Islamic education**

- Islamic teachings on differences between men and women to appreciate the beauty and



importance of such differences. Define and clarify the meaning and what constitutes acts of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) for men and women, specify acts of respect and kindness towards women and their weightage in a Muslim's relationship to Allah.

- Provide, exemplify, and propagate contextualised, nuanced, and in-depth prophetic examples (using *seerah* – life of the Prophet – not just *hadiths* – prophetic narrations) of the marital dynamics between the Prophet and his companions' households, and the different roles the Prophet's wives and female companions play at the time.
- Islamic scholars to deconstruct misogynistic/patriarchal interpretation of *qawwam* (guardianship) and the internalisation of unhealthy and abusive power dynamics.

**Workshops for women with an Islamic lens** – psychological well-being, time management, resource (mental, spiritual, physical) management, accessing opportunities and balancing different responsibilities.

**Intergenerational re-education on changing dynamics of men and women**

- Facilitated intergenerational conversations about current realities – demonstrate how the patriarchal family framework is no longer sustainable/realistic. May use the worldview framework to realign the views of the older and younger generations. Establish and acknowledge the difference in perspective and use language that both generations can understand.

- Create co-learning opportunities with different ethnic and religious groups in navigating modern reality, and creating balanced and healthy spousal/familial relationships as well as in the workplace/community advocacy space.

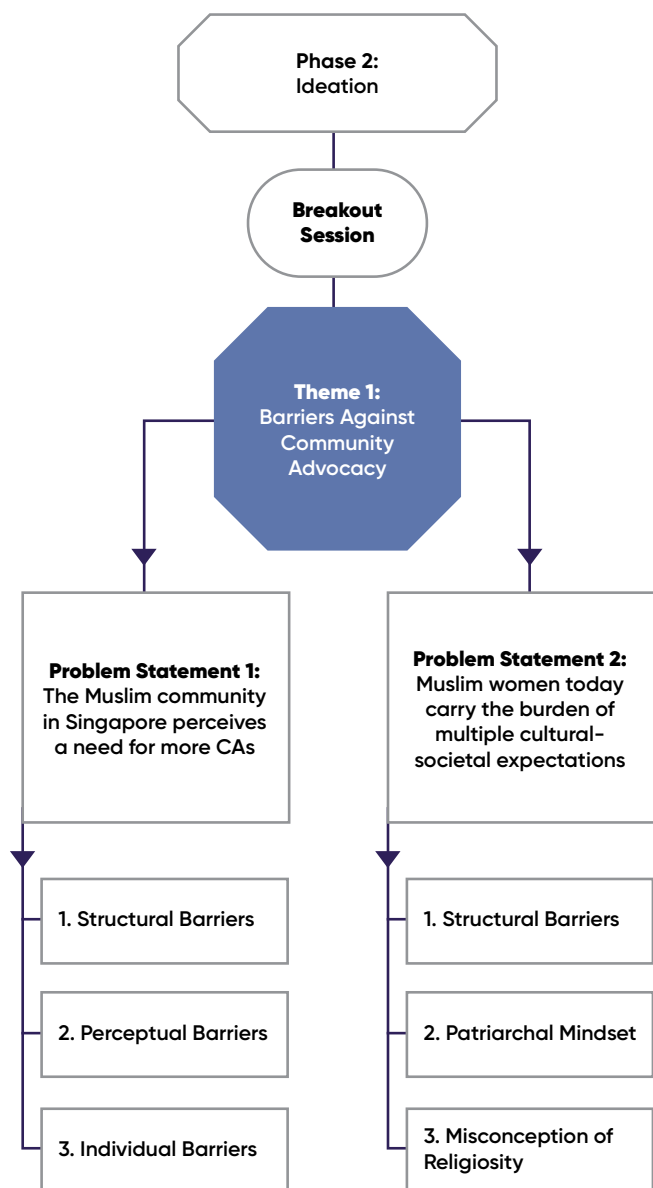


Fig. 7: Overview of ideation for Theme 1 of Community Advocates Panel paper

## Community Advocacy on Social Media

### PROBLEM STATEMENT 1:

Social media provides an environment that breeds narcissism – an inflated sense of self-importance and entitlement – potentially affecting how advocacy is carried out. As a result, individuals may be more interested in social media likes and shares rather than actual advocacy work.

The design of social media platforms was defined as the key factor in creating an environment that breeds narcissism and compromises the effectiveness of online advocacy.

**Social media platforms were designed** for the creation and growth of social networks between like-minded individuals, i.e., echo chambers, and creating profit through user engagements. User engagement measures such as likes and shares lead to personal gratifications – these promote narcissistic behaviour such as over-inflation of self and over-sharing. This is problematic for the following reasons:

**1. Advocacy work requires** 1) connection between people of diverse backgrounds and different opinions and perspectives; 2) investment and commitment of resources (time, intellectual capital, financial capital, activation networks) in order to 3) produce in-depth and nuanced analyses and explanations of problems, including issues of intersectionality, then 4) create and enact effective short-term and long-term solutions.

**2. User engagements** are important in gaining and retaining online credibility, but they become problematic when they lead to narcissistic tendencies or if online community advocates (CAs) only focus on gaining numbers/popularity and not on the responsibility or advocating power that the numbers would bring.

**3. The effectiveness of online advocacy work (objectives and action) is compromised when affected by narcissistic tendencies**, for example, the propagation of superficial, egoistic, and simplistic content. Such propagations, when made by online CAs with high influencing

capacity, foster divisiveness and spread negative values in the community.



### IDEATION ANALYSIS

How do we encourage effective advocacy on social media despite this challenge? How do we build on the strengths of CAs using social media in Singapore? Which Islamic values can be encouraged to overcome these issues, and how?

#### 1. Masterclasses and capacity building training by experts for online CAs

##### *Islamic etiquette lessons and campaigns*

- Educate influencers on the **importance of intention** – wanting to be liked is not blameworthy if it is for the right intention. Hence lessons and campaigns should educate online CAs on the necessity of reframing and purifying their intention of wanting to be liked. The lessons should also teach online CAs simple and quick methods/habits of purifying intention, being self-reflective, and exercising mindfulness.
- Educate on optimising a Muslim's most powerful tool – **du'a (supplication) and barakah (blessings)**. CAs can consciously apply these tools to ensure protection of their hearts from negative values, and create psychological and spiritual resilience against setbacks, challenges, and lack of visible progress.
- Inculcate the value of **fact-checking (being just)** – create a meaningful understanding of the consequences of spreading false or misleading information to effectively inculcate the habit of verifying information.

- Inculcate Islamic values that challenge/suppress narcissism, such as social justice, respect, openness, conscientiousness, accountability, humility, conscious deliberation, self-empowerment, and being action-oriented.
- Educate on the etiquettes of communication and *ikhtilaf* (differences of opinion) – teach effective communication, methods and importance of being disciplined in reading/listening to alternative perspectives, and how to respond emotively but rationally, instead of emotionally reacting.

**Strategy lessons** – guide online CAs on how to be objective-focused and maintain traction – sessions should outline clear, definite, and achievable objectives that are solution-focused; and methodology of advanced planning and translating/linking short-term objectives to long-term objectives. This is to ensure online advocacy work does not end at superficial creation of awareness.

**Operational lessons** – create in-depth understanding of the operations of social media platforms and methods to optimise each function. This would aid in creating online traction and maintaining momentum (for example how to trend # on X).

**Content creating lessons** – teach methods of creating visually attractive, concise, entertaining/interesting but nuanced, educational, and factual posts. Provide research training to guide online CAs on methods of fact-checking and developing nuanced understanding. Provide examples of best practices such as utilisation of humour and satire and methods to spark conversations and challenge stereotypes without triggering dissonance.

**Fund raising lessons** – provide information on available grants/credits provided by each platform and application method, and methods on creating endowments (example: monetise platforms).

**Branding and online presence lessons** – guide online CAs in creating personal branding, and strategies to gain high following and user engagements.

**Methods to diversify audience and stakeholders** – this is to overcome echo chambers/block thinking.

**Offline competency trainings** – train online CAs in public speaking, running workshops, measuring outcomes, etc.

Create a **mentoring system** for online advocates.

## 2. Collaborations – enhancing the Islamic concept of *jamaa’ah* (working in unison/solidarity)

**Online and offline perceptual change campaigns** to encourage collaborative attitude and healthy competitions, and to reduce suspicious mentalities and posturing.

**Optimise a flat hierarchy in social media for aid campaigns** – social media increases accessibility and speed to aid, especially flash aid campaigns for emergencies. Influencers or advocacy platforms may act as a direct link between recipients and donors, minimising processes and red tape.

**Create databases that match/link organisations and/or advocates to each other** – use social media as leverage to enhance offline work, as it is ineffective to completely transfer advocacy work online.

**Develop relevant programmes** – facilitate and moderate dialogue

sessions; create awareness campaigns using offline advertising and traditional media; develop small-scale and large-scale programmes/activities targeted at solving issues; target policies; and engage stakeholders who can influence change.

**Tap on psychology of influence** – social media influencers are owners of attention. They have influencing power over their followers, thus it is important to tap their capacity to create positive and effective social change. Use their influence over public attention to direct and maintain the flow of online conversations. Influencing capacity is also optimal for effective perceptual change campaigns.

#### **PROBLEM STATEMENT 2:**

The design of social media may cause individuals to remain in their own circles, engaging mostly like-minded individuals. This may hinder constructive discussions on complex issues that cross diverse interest groups.

Three areas were outlined as factors hindering constructive discussions and effective community advocacy: the design of social media platforms, the lack of an evidence-based approach and neutrality, and psychological barriers.

#### **1. Design of Social Media Platforms**

**Platforms are not necessarily reflective of community sentiments** – the design of social media amplifies loud voices in the community, which may be a minority view, causing a skewed sensing of actual majority sentiments. Furthermore, due to the importance placed on user engagements, influencers and social media users become fixated on outreach and tend to stray away from their initial advocacy objectives. The design also encourages ego-centric sharing, giving advocates and general users alike a sense of self-importance. This system creates the

illusion that being the loudest equates to being the most important or the most powerful.

**The user interface is designed for visually intuitive, brief, and rapid engagement**, as it was designed for leisure activity. This consequently leads to reactionary and superficial consumption of contents.

**Cascades of news and issues advocated simultaneously** lead to viral content being superficially discussed and having a short lifespan (not sustainable). This leads to superficial and unimpactful advocacy.

**The design exacerbates the spread of negative news** – humans are psychologically designed to be more attuned to negative news, amplifying negativity despite the presence of overwhelming positivity. Long-term exposure to high negative content on social media has psychological consequences that can be irreversible or permanent. Psychological consequences include mental fatigue, sense of powerlessness, and shortened attention span. This consequently creates more barriers to challenging difficult problems and maintaining advocacy momentum on social media.

**Owners of social media platforms** (largely from among the liberal west) have control over the selection, flow and accessibility of data – censorship from these powerful minorities skews online sentiments and advocacy, which has offline influence especially on youths. This becomes a serious barrier against local advocacy work that propagate alternate/different ideals.

#### **2. Lack of Evidence-Based Approach and Neutrality**

**Social media users untrained in Islamic sciences tend to blindly extrapolate from Islamic sources**, i.e., without exercising the proper (or any) methodology. This can result in the spread of Islamic misconceptions.

**Tendency to voice opinions without verification and in-depth understanding** – this leads to the spread of fake news/misinformation; it fans the flames within echo chambers, and creates greater polarity in opinions and camps.

**Gaslighting and trolling phenomena** – such tactics of invalidating proper well-thought arguments make it difficult to overcome echo chambers.

**Clickbait headlines, biased framing of content, and incendiary tone**, adopted to attract high engagements and to feed echo chambers, propagate heated, superficial and skewed opinions rather than balanced and well-researched perspectives.

**Congregation around “safe” and “trendy” (hot button) issues** may have validity but this type of culture results in the disregard of pertinent but difficult or unpopular issues. Some online CAs champion these issues sincerely but others may do so to appear anti-establishment or gain online traction (fame/popularity).

### 3. Psychological Barriers

**Confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance** – the human mind has a cognitive preference for interactions within spaces that affirm their biases and perspectives, while challenges to ideals and perspectives create cognitive dissonance. Such spaces create psychological discomfort resulting in reflexive defensive posturing against challengers of ideals. Such psychological barriers lead to a prevalence of block thinking, echo chambers, divisiveness, “othering” (valuing only one’s own values while denigrating and marginalising all others), and lack of empathy and openness to listen and consider opposing views and perspectives.

**Frustration from lack of ability to articulate** – When individuals have strong emotional attachment to an issue but lack the language or intellectual/cognitive clarity to express them, they resort to aggressive and abrasive language due to frustration.

**Intuitive and reactive engagement with content** on social media also leads to unquestioning acceptance of information, preventing conception of differing opinions and perspectives. This is especially in cases where during the onset of virality, only a single perspective prevails.



## IDEATION ANALYSIS

How can we overcome echo chambers to reconcile the community to complex and potentially divisive issues? Which Islamic values can be encouraged to overcome these issues, and how?

### 1. Offline sessions between oppositional online CAs

**In-person dialogues and networking sessions** – facilitate and moderate small group, closed-door conversations in neutral spaces between opposing advocacy groups, with clearly defined and enforced house rules. Offline sessions humanise individuals and encourage respectful and non-confrontational behaviour. The objective of such sessions is to create opportunities to define and understand contrasting worldviews, widen perspectives, overcome “othering”, and determine points of intersection and reconciliation.

### 2. Exercise deliberation and conscientiousness

**Practise goal-oriented communication** – exercise deliberation, apply intelligence and wisdom, and ensure communication is productive and strategic as online platforms require concision, endorse impunity, and lacks body language.

### 3. Create a culture of *adabul ikhtilaf*:

Define, practise, and campaign for:

- A culture of unity in diversity – create extensive awareness of the guidelines of diversity in Islam. Outline issues that are fundamental and not debatable, and issues that are open to debate and differences of opinions. Creating a holistic understanding of Islam requires education beyond rituals.

- *Iqra'* (reading) culture, i.e., the culture of inquisitiveness and fact-checking.
- Culture of being nimble-minded.
- Culture of openness, respect, empathy, and seeking truth – encourage conscious efforts to understand and think positively of others – to prevent automatic rejection of opinions and perspectives due to negative biases.
- Culture of listening – create an understanding of the need to listen to be heard. If opposing sides are simultaneously shouting, it will only lead to further polarisation and will impede possibility of reconciliation.
- Culture of patience – create an understanding that individuals are at different levels of readiness. This would create a culture of giving people time, as different people are at different timelines in their relationship with Allah and at different levels of maturity (some individuals need to experience setbacks and failures before reaching an understanding).

Inculcate critical thinking in education system – create spaces for safe, respectful open debates. Inculcate the value of respectful questioning in education and humility to acknowledge the lack of knowledge. This must begin in classrooms and/or lecture halls.

Train and equip educators on how to respond to challenging questions, and the skills to navigate difficult topics/discussions.

#### 4. Create platforms and mechanisms for safe discussions

Proactively initiate discussions on important and sensitive topics before echo chambers calcify and solidify.

**Establish and enforce house rules on pages/platforms** – hire a moderator to ensure respectful and healthy flow of discussion, delete comments that contain offensive language and trolling behaviour.

Present **nuanced facts** on issues to be discussed.

**Develop AI system encouraging positive language/tone and fact-checking** – we can create a similar algorithm to the “COVID content warnings” or “sensitive content warnings” system that warns against negative/hostile language/tone/content and provides suggestions for positive/neutral alternatives. Such mechanisms compel deliberation and conscientiousness, as contemplative pauses induce a psychological shift from reactive to responsive behaviour/thinking. Such mechanisms could balance emotional reactions through the activation of rational thinking.

#### PROBLEM STATEMENT 3:

There is a lack of *adab* or etiquette when conversing online. There is a need to “agree to disagree” and be “passionate without being disrespectful” to have constructive discussions.

Participants had outlined three main sources contributing to the lack of online communication etiquette: the design of social media platforms, the education system, and psychological barriers.

##### 1. Design of Social Media Platforms

The absence of tone, body language and human touch from online communication creates a tendency for misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This is exacerbated when two individuals are from vastly different cultures. The lack of “human face” dehumanises the other

party, removing natural incentives to display good communication etiquette. This creates fertile ground for rapid descent into hostile verbal disputes and reduces accessibility to productive dialogues.

**Rapid simultaneous commenting** makes it easy for “trolling” and for conversations to deviate from its point of origin. This makes accessing and maintaining productive dialogues even more challenging.

**The design also facilitates and aggravates cancel cultures** – Rapid global connection within the platform intensifies the pressure to conform to perceived/online social expectations and trends. These expectations and trends are controlled by actors who are owners of online attention, such as microcelebrities. In this landscape, non-conforming behaviours are immediately punished through verbal bullying, character assassinations, or cancel campaigns (especially for influencers). In serious cases, it can even have offline consequences.

**Silent reasonable majority** – Many users are turned away by the toxicity of online discussions and tend to silently watch and read content without active engagement. The absence of these individuals skews general sentiments and intensify toxicity since there is no significant intervention.

## 2. Education System Inculcates Groupthink

**There is absence of a healthy civic culture** to encourage and facilitate healthy and respectful open dialogues. On the other hand, disagreements with educators are often seen as disrespect. Singapore’s education culture cultivates blind following as the environment discourages questioning authority and the validity of information taught. Students in pre-tertiary or tertiary institutes are not nurtured to critically think, question, and debate contents conveyed in classrooms. Overly questioning educators is oftentimes viewed as being contrary and challenging authority. This results in lost opportunities to inculcate nuanced perspectives, open-mindedness, healthy and respectful communication skills, and methods of navigating and reconciling disagreements.

## 3. Psychological Barriers

**Stereotyping and confirmation bias** is the cognitive tendency to have a preconceived opinion/idea about an individual prior to engaging them. It becomes a barrier to openness during interactions and limits an individual’s capacity to consider and understand opposing perspectives.

**Paranoia and self-censorship** – Singapore’s history of reprisals against expression of opposing ideals/opinions has led to the community’s internalisation of fear and heightened self-censorships. This leads to an obsession with anonymity, within which exists a culture of expressing with impunity sans accountability and credibility. This circumstance creates the dichotomy of safety vs accountability and anonymity vs credibility.



### IDEATION ANALYSIS

How can we foster the culture of respectful and constructive online engagements?  
Which Islamic values can be encouraged to overcome these issues, and how?

#### 1. Individual Responsibilities

**In-person dialogues and networking sessions** – facilitate and moderate small group, closed-door dialogue sessions and encourage participants to focus on ideas and opinions – focus on the content of speech rather than the “labels” or identity of the individual and consciously challenge preconceived notions and stereotypes.

**Actively challenge groupthink** – Islam has set boundaries and allowances for differences in opinion. There is great emphasis on independent and critical thought and criticism against blind following. Actively challenge fixations on own ideas and use a balanced approach in analysing issues.

**Be the "centre of radiance"** – make conscious effort to display good online communication etiquette, setting a good example for others to follow.

## 2. Setting Boundaries

**Define house rules** for online communication.

Create **pervasive public awareness campaigns** on house rules – create ads, collaborate with influencers and popular online pages, and trend hashtags.

Online CAs to **set boundaries and enforce house rules** on their own platforms – to create safe spaces for effective communication.

**Moderate, not regulate** – partner with social media platforms to create algorithms encouraging adherence to house rules but minimise the regulation of online spaces to maintain a safe environment for advocacy.

## 3. Syllabus, Campaigns, and Education on *adabul ikhtilaf* (etiquette of disagreement)

**Educate on *adab* (etiquette) in conversations**

- **Credibility and integrity** – ensure there are no falsehoods in any comments made, ensure that the source of information is credible, and verify facts before transmitting them.
- **Accountability to Allah** – be accountable to statements made, even in anonymity; be prepared to clarify if mistakes were made; and practise regular self-reflections (*muhasabah*).
- **Wisdom** – choose words carefully, especially when the tone can easily be misinterpreted.

- **Humility and openness** – set clear intentions, be open and ready to new ideas and to be proven wrong.
- **Self-awareness and general awareness** – be aware of one's own setbacks and be aware of contexts and general circumstances.
- **Patience and deliberation** – do not force others; step back when engagements are not beneficial. Pick a proper time and place for a more effective response.
- **Tawakkal and redha** – do the best you can within your means, stand your ground, leave the rest to Allah and *redha* (acceptance) with the outcome. Understand that the power to change and move hearts belongs to Allah, not humans.
- **Addeenun naseehah** (advising is part of Islam) – shift the mentality that advice is equivalent to judgement. Constructive criticism is necessary for growth, and advising and preventing others from doing wrong is an obligation in Islam.

**Contextualise Islamic knowledge to current issues** – e.g., Muslim.sg and Yaqeen Institute.

**Engage mosques and parents** for capacity building programmes.

**Emphasise values of *haya'*** (values for all Muslims irrespective of gender) – modesty is beyond physical covering but also in speech and behaviour. To deter bad *akhlaq/adab* (character/etiquette) and increase awareness of accountability to Allah, so anonymity from human masses is not a shield.

**Campaigns are interventionists in nature** – learn from methods used in Singapore Kindness Movement and other successful public campaigns.



**Collaborate with influencers and famous pages** – ensure that the conversation is everywhere and reaches subliminal level of the masses.

Campaigns should be conducted in tandem with a shift in education syllabus and workshop programmes.

**Create follow-up measures** to ensure the enforcement of online etiquettes – engage online CAs to moderate behaviour on their own platforms.

#### 4. Positive Campaigns

**Create positive campaigns to counter cancel campaigns** – this is a soft alternative to the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). Use trending systems and online marketing tools to advocate positive online behaviour. Create waves of positivity to counter onslaughts of negativity. These campaigns can be fronted/partnered with influencers to create speed and visibility.

#### 5. Analysis

**Online behaviour of impunity** (bad *akhlaq/adab*) must be further examined. Is it reflective of the entire community, generation-specific, or individual-specific? If it is at the societal level, we must determine whether online and offline behaviours are reflective of each other. Depending on the result of the analysis, develop interventions specific to the scope of the problem.

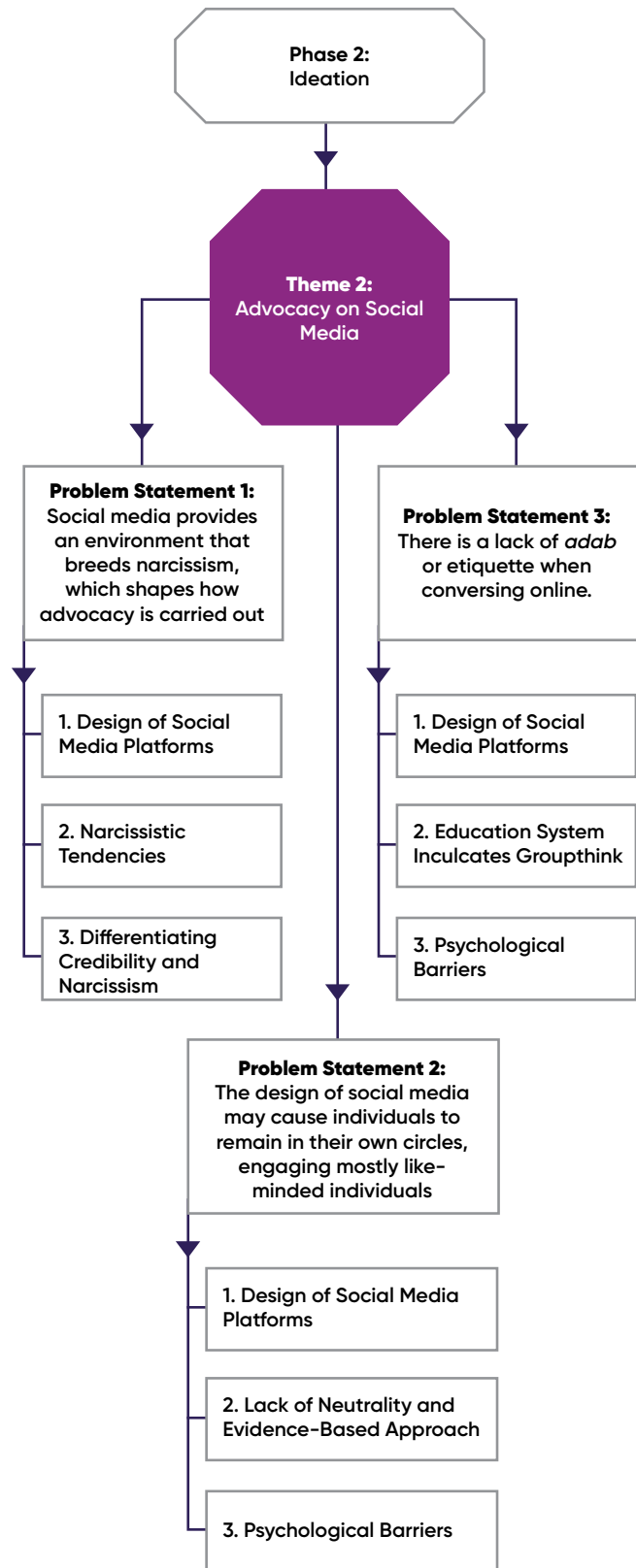


Fig. 8: Overview of ideation for Theme 2 of Community Advocates Panel paper

## CONCLUSION

This work paper was initiated with the main objective of **providing support for Muslim professionals to play more significant roles in strengthening communities**, and the secondary objective of **encouraging Islamic values in promoting advocacy**. A qualitative approach had been adopted to first produce an accurate assessment of ground reality, then to ideate potential solutions to achieve the work paper's objectives.

Based on findings from the online survey and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in the first phase, five problem statements classified under two themes were defined for the community advocacy panel.

### Theme 1: Barriers Against Community Advocacy

1. The Muslim community in Singapore perceives a need for more community advocates (CAs). However, factors such as lack of time, perceptions of rigidity in Community and Muslim Organisations (CMOs), as well as fear of reprisals hinder Muslim professionals from stepping forward.
2. Muslim women today carry the burden of multiple socio-cultural expectations – being expected to work while juggling responsibilities at home. There is also some negative perception towards women who choose to be homemakers. These expectations hinder their effective participation in community advocacy.

### Theme 2: Community Advocacy on Social Media

3. Social media provides an environment that breeds narcissism – an inflated sense of self-importance and entitlement – potentially affecting how advocacy is carried out. As a result, individuals may be more interested in social media likes and shares rather than actual advocacy work.
4. The design of social media may cause individuals to remain in their own circles, engaging mostly like-minded individuals. This may hinder constructive discussions on complex issues that cross diverse interest groups.

5. There is a lack of *adab* (etiquette when conversing online). There is a need to “agree to disagree” and be “passionate without being disrespectful” to have constructive discussions.

During AMP's 4<sup>th</sup> National Convention, 77 participants then ideated solutions for these problem statements. The intensive and structured session resulted in potential solutions the community could adopt. Since the problems are intersectional in nature, ideations that target multiple issues should be prioritised.

For problem statement 1, “Enhance the civic space by nurturing a healthy contestation of ideas”; “Reframing community advocacy and life priorities according to the Islamic worldview”; and “Establish a body dedicated to encouraging collaborations between Muslim CAs and CMOs” were the three ideations that simultaneously target the greatest number of issues. See Appendix B for further details.

For problem statement 2, “Campaigns on “feminine duties””; “Programmes training couples to outline, communicate, and negotiate roles and responsibilities in marriage”; and “Campaigns on unique female strengths” were the three ideations with the highest number of targeted problems. Appendix C expands on this.

Subsequently, for the problem statements in theme 2, “Masterclasses and capacity building trainings by experts”; “Collaborations – enhancing the Islamic concept of *jamaa'ah*”; “Exercise deliberation and conscientiousness”; “Create a culture of *adabul ikhtilaf*”; and “Create syllabus, campaigns and education on *adabul ikhtilaf* or etiquette of disagreements” were ideations that focus on the greatest number of problems simultaneously. Further details on this analysis can be found under Appendix D, Appendix E, and Appendix F.

These ideations, despite being detailed, still require further development. This work paper encourages CMOs and Muslim CAs to consider undertaking them to advance the needs of Muslim CAs in Singapore.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Community Advocates Panel Problem Definition Phase – Discussion of Findings

One of the main issues that the country faces is self-censorship and, even in 2022, it is still a problem. From the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), respondents – some of whom are extremely active socially – discussed the fear of reprisal as a significant factor that deters a lot of advocacy work. Scholars have also discussed how activists, journalists and even ordinary citizens often censor themselves<sup>3</sup>. We find that this remains an issue. The apprehension stems from perceptions that individuals seen as challenging the State or perceived to be controversial are reprimanded by government leaders.

Some respondents have also mentioned the internalisation of stereotypes as a problem that deters advocacy. The myth of the lazy Malay is unfortunately still prevalent, as is the meritocratic myth that says “If you work hard, you will succeed; and if you do not succeed, that means you did not work hard”. Beliefs like these deter people from advocating for the less privileged, since individual – not structural – factors would be cited for their problems.

Furthermore, there is a lack of solidarity among advocates. Respondents observed that advocates and Community and Muslim Organisations (CMOs) without access to the government are overly cynical compared to those that do have such access, and vice versa. They also observed a lack of resources channelled to collaborative work, including in CMOs.

For Muslim women, in addition to the challenges to advocacy in general, they have the added burden of socio-cultural expectations: being working women while juggling other identities. These hurdles exist and are not advocacy-specific, but a note on the importance of having male allies is still due, as mentioned by the respondents. At the same time, some respondents pointed out that there is some disdain towards women who choose to be homemakers, and that this type of condescension is not in line with true equality.

In the case of social media, the study found it to be a key arena, perhaps *the* key arena, for advocacy. Whatever the consequences, social media has become pervasive; hence it is a reality that has to be dealt with. This reality comes with a lot of good: the barriers to entry for advocacy are much lower; individuals are able to overcome obstacles that previously inhibited the airing of opinions such as mainstream media, limiting them to only articulating their thoughts publicly through organisations or self-censorship. Notable movements have started because of social media, and a lot of good work has been enabled by it.

At the same time, social media can be a transformative force that is not always for the better. A culture of narcissism has been enabled by social media, and it has also affected how advocacy is carried out. It may be that advocates have become more interested in social media likes and shares rather than getting things done. Worse still, the nature of social media may lead to polarisation, as advocates may be in their respective silos and echo chambers and not want to find solutions for difficult issues that cut across different interest groups, hence requiring significant compromise. This polarisation is aggravated by the lack of “*adab*” or etiquette exercised online.

Social media has contributed to a more narcissistic, and perhaps less selfless, culture where people are always eager to inflate themselves under the guise of self-affirmation. As emphasised earlier, baseline Islamic values can contribute to the alleviation of the problems faced by humanity. The findings reflect this belief. Among the inclusivist Islamic values outlined is the execution of justice, integrity, accountability, wisdom, patience, empathy, and being selfless for the sake of Allah. A specific Islamic teaching that was highlighted is to deflate one’s own ego to the point that one becomes in service of others; one is always encouraged to de-emphasise (not devalue) one’s self.

These findings justify the sub-objective of the study, which is to encourage the fostering of Islamic values in promoting advocacy work.

<sup>3</sup> See: George, Cherian. *Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. See also: Abdullah, Walid Jumblatt. *Islam in a Secular State: Muslim Activism in Singapore*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021.

**Appendix B:**

	Institutional barriers	CMOs rigidity	Infrastructure of Advocacy Space	Absence of Islamic Wordview	Stigma of Incentivising Community Advocacy work
Rebranding CMOs from "self-help" to "community touch point"		✓			
Create awareness/ campaigns on the nuances & intersectionality of the problems faced by the Muslim community in Singapore		✓			
Reframe understanding of CA work & life priorities according to Islamic worldview				✓	
Develop a holistic ecosystem for community advocacy and CA development			✓		✓
Establish a body dedicated to encouraging collaborative behaviour & coordinating collaborations between Muslim CA and CMOs			✓		
Enhance the civic space by nurturing a healthy contestation of ideas	✓		✓		✓

Fig. 9: Solutions addressing Problem Statement 1 of Theme 1: Barriers Against Community Advocacy

**Appendix B:**

	Concept of Time, Credibility & Accountability	Mental Barriers	Absence of Islamic Worldview	Lack of Advocacy Skillset	Absence of Openness	Inadequate Guidance in Navigating the Civic Space
Rebranding CMOs from "self-help" to "community touch point"	✓	✓				
Create awareness/campaigns on the nuances & intersectionality of the problems faced by the Muslim community in Singapore		✓				
Reframe understanding of CA work & life priorities according to Islamic worldview	✓	✓	✓			
Develop a holistic ecosystem for community advocacy and CA development				✓		
Establish a body dedicated to encouraging collaborative behaviour & coordinating collaborations between Muslim CA and CMOs				✓	✓	✓
Enhance the civic space by nurturing a healthy contestation of ideas					✓	✓

Fig. 9: Solutions addressing Problem Statement 1 of Theme 1: Barriers Against Community Advocacy

**Appendix C:**

	Inadequate infrastructure facilitating women's active presence in Community Advocacy space	Inadequate engagement with women who are homemakers	Inadequate personal capacity	Government policies, family law, social work, foster systems are still built upon patriarchal lenses	Insufficient understanding and appreciation of the differences between men and women
Campaigns on the unique female strengths				✓	✓
Campaigns on "feminine duties"		✓		✓	✓
Campaigns, conversations and Friday sermons for men with Islamic lens					✓
Engage men in places of influence to advocate and role-model paradigm shift					✓
Education campaign on how to create change	✓				
Create policies (national and CMO level) and infrastructure			✓	✓	
Define alternative sources of income for homemakers and policies for safety net		✓			
Increase accessibility of resources (including information) to women	✓		✓		
Human libraries for role-making	✓			✓	
Programmes engaging homemakers		✓			
Programmes training couples to outline, communicate and negotiate roles and responsibilities in marriage	✓		✓	✓	✓
Workshops for women with Islamic lens		✓	✓	✓	
Intergenerational re-education on changing dynamics of men & women	✓			✓	

Fig. 10: Solutions addressing Problem Statement 2 of Theme 1: Barriers Against Community Advocacy

## Appendix C:

	Absence of meaningful understanding and appreciation of "feminine" duties	Women's internalisation of gender roles, gender appropriate careers, and the honour of being a "superwoman"	Imbalance in social and financial roles between husbands and wives creates a cycle of trauma	Superficial/ inadequate understanding of prophetic tradition	Framing of women's religiosity being tied to compliment to the home
Campaigns on the unique female strengths	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Campaigns on "feminine duties"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Campaigns, conversations and Friday sermons for men with Islamic lens	✓				
Engage men in places of influence to advocate and role-model paradigm shift	✓				
Education campaign on how to create change					
Create policies (national and CMO level) and infrastructure					
Define alternative sources of income for homemakers and policies for safety net		✓	✓		✓
Increase accessibility of resources (including information) to women				✓	
Human libraries for role-making		✓		✓	
Programmes engaging homemakers	✓				
Programmes training couples to outline, communicate and negotiate roles and responsibilities in marriage	✓	✓	✓		✓
Workshops for women with Islamic lens	✓			✓	✓
Intergenerational re-education on changing dynamics of men & women			✓	✓	✓

Fig. 10: Solutions addressing Problem Statement 2 of Theme 1: Barriers Against Community Advocacy

**Appendix D:**

	Platforms were designed for the creation & growth of social network between like-minded individuals	Narcissistic tendencies (overinflation of self & oversharing) exacerbated by profit design	Differentiating credibility and narcissism
Masterclass & capacity building trainings by experts	✓	✓	✓
Collaborations – enhancing Islamic concept of <i>jamaa'ah</i>	✓	✓	✓

Fig. 11: Solutions addressing Problem Statement 1 of Theme 2: Community Advocacy on Social Media



## Appendix E:

	Platforms are not necessarily reflective of community sentiments	User interface designed for visually intuitive, brief, and rapid engagement	Cascade of news & issues simultaneously advocated	The design exacerbates the spread of negative news	Owners of social media platform	
Offline sessions between oppositional online CAs	✓					
Exercise deliberation & conscientiousness		✓	✓	✓		
Create culture of <i>adabul ikhtilaf</i>						
Online platform & mechanisms for safe discussions					✓	

Fig. 12: Solutions addressing Problem Statement 2 of Theme 2: Community Advocacy on Social Media

	Social media users untrained in Islamic sciences tend to blindly extrapolate from Islamic sources	Tendency to voice opinions without verification & in-depth understanding	Gaslighting and trolling phenomenon	Clickbait headlines, biased framing of content, and incendiary tone	Congregation around "safe" and "trendy" (hot button) issues	Confirmation bias & cognitive dissonance	Frustration from inability to express	Intuitive and reactive engagement with content
					✓		✓	
	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	✓		✓	✓			✓	
					✓	✓		