

## MASCULINITY IN INTERSECTIONALITY: Oppression through Obscurity in the Muslim and Malay Community in Southeast Asia

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### Abstract

*This article strives to investigate the appearance of a defined form of masculinity within various aspects of identity in the Muslim and Malay community in Southeast Asia. This appearance enables for a multilayered understanding of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity which is reinforced by various institutions that fosters and defines the various components of identity. This is by itself a source of tension for men both for the expectations and performance of masculine roles as well as the struggle for a coherent masculinity despite the tensions from the different aspects of identity. Additionally, this article further posits that the very existence of masculinity in these various overlapping aspects presents an opportunity for obscurity by design for the purposes of mystifying masculinity, its functions and ultimately its authority in various institutions and situations. Therefore, the resulting tension and difficulty in defining masculinity on its own terms, is the result of this purposeful obscurity where definition, enforcement, policing and the construction of meaning can only be done through understanding the intersectional location of masculinity. To attempt to dissect this, the article explores masculinity via the following threads, where do we explore the tenets of hegemonic masculinity and the 'normal' man? Where are roles and definitions of masculinity obscured by design? And the following debate around the crisis of masculinity.*



*[Artikel ini mengkaji tentang kemunculan bentuk identitas baku maskulinitas dalam beragam aspek identitas komunitas Melayu dan Muslim di Asia Tenggara. Kemunculan itu memungkinkan pemahaman multi-perspektif tentang maskulinitas dan maskulinitas hegemonik yang didukung oleh berbagai institusi yang mendorong dan mendefinisikan berbagai komponen identitas. Hal ini dengan sendirinya menjadi sumber ketegangan bagi kaum laki-laki, baik tentang ekspektasi dan penampilan peran-peran maskulin serta usaha untuk maskulinitas koheren, meskipun ada ketegangan dari aspek-aspek yang berbeda dari identitas. Selain itu, artikel ini berargumen bahwa eksistensi paling mendasar maskulinitas dalam beberapa aspek yang saling tumpang tindih menghadirkan ketidakjelasan secara disengaja demi tujuan mengaburkan maskulinitas termasuk fungsinya, terutama otoritasnya dalam berbagai institusi dan situasi. Oleh sebab itu, kesulitan dan ketegangan yang tercipta dalam mendefinisikan maskulinitas terhadap terminologinya sendiri merupakan akibat dari ketidakjelasan yang hanya dapat diselesaikan melalui pemahaman penempatan yang saling berkelindan tentang maskulinitas. Artikel ini kemudian mengeksplorasi teori-teori dan kepercayaan tentang maskulinitas hegemonik melalui pertanyaan mendasar: dimana kita mengeksplorasi teori-teori maskulinitas hegemonik dan manusia 'biasa'? Dimana peran dan definisi maskulinitas yang disamarkan secara sengaja? Dan perdebatan-perdebatan lain seputar krisis maskulinitas.]*

**Keywords:** *Masculinity, Hegemonic masculinity, Muslim and Malay community, Southeast Asia*

## **Introduction**

Various authors in gender studies have lamented on the lack of research available in the field of masculinity as compared to the spotlight thrown on women's studies. This state of affairs has been attributed to the taken for granted belief in society of the status of masculinity as the normal and women studies as the exception that needed further research and understanding. Masculinity then, "is also inherently relational 'masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity,'<sup>1</sup> therefore it is studied in relation to women's studies and is contrasted and compared.

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<sup>1</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power* (California: California University Press, 2005), p. 67.

Further with the rise of Men's studies through the lens of LGBTQ relations where the men studied are linked to homosexual and transsexual circles. In short, if one argues on the predominance of heteronormativity and clear gender boundaries as the normal then these studies on men represent either reflected notions of masculinity or an understanding based on transgressions and deviations. This together with the farther advanced state of femininity research would indicate that the, "concept of masculinity seems to be a fairly recent historical product."<sup>2</sup> While it is encouraging that men are being studied in some capacity, "in speaking of masculinity at all then, we are doing gender in a culturally specific way,"<sup>3</sup> however the understanding that there is no single masculinity but masculinities has grown however, this does not change the fact that 'normal' masculinity is still yet to be explored and understood in its own terms as well as the relationship between masculinities and the possibly more vociferous parts of the masculinity subset on society.

### **The Fundamental**

The growth of masculinity studies has cast a light on fundamental beliefs and its effects. None more fundamental than the treatment of masculinity as standardized and uniform. Where the understanding of what is masculine is similar in all sections of society in all parts of the world. Despite attempts to ensure the transfer of certain knowledge from one generation to the next through educational and familial institutions<sup>4</sup> local differences still exist. These differences are influenced by a multitude of factors including, ethnicity, culture, religion and ideology often acting on each other in relations of intersectionality as gender identities "are fractured and shifting because multiple discourses intersect in any

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Christian Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, "Schooling Masculinities," Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (ed.), *Understanding Masculinities* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 1996), p. 50-60.

individual life.”<sup>5</sup> With this existence of a selection process in “Not only are different masculinities worked out in relation to other masculinities. These relations as part of a hegemony are mediating oppression and domination.”<sup>6</sup>

Further, hints towards a hierarchical and bounded understanding of masculinity are both explicit and implicitly. In order to create and maintain this hegemonic pyramid, oppression of ideas that do not fit and domination to ensure the rise of others must be established and practiced. “Power is differentiated so that styles of masculinity become ascendant or domination in certain situations. Their ascendancy is achieved through the processes of persuasion, having the power to define what is normal and ‘ordinary’ male behavior. Power is linked to material practices, so that various social and cultural arenas provide the potential for the ascendancy of masculinities.”<sup>7</sup> In order to maintain and sustain this pyramid of masculinity, power needs to be consolidated and exercised relevantly. The establishment of which requires domination of not just the gender relation but also within masculinity. This requires different tools acting together and in tandem ensuring that the chosen definition, actions, behaviors, and roles are what is ‘expected’ of a man based on social practice, “Social practice is creative and inventive, but not inchoate. It responds to particular situations and is generated within definite structures of social relations.”<sup>8</sup> This power to define and subsequently relegate is essential and important in ensuring that a ‘normal’ masculinity exists and is reproduced. This ‘normal’ masculinity underpins the institutionally supported roles and subsequent social rewards that enables men with a certain masculinity from enjoying privileges that are unquestioned and expected. Ultimately, gender identities are “fractured

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<sup>5</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power...*

<sup>6</sup> Christian Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, “Schooling Masculinities...”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power...*

and shifting because multiple discourses intersect in any individual life.”<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, not only is masculinity not essentially standard and uniform, but the existence of such notions and hegemony is at the expense of social and institutional efforts to ensure that ‘normal’ exists and becomes the dominant version of reality to the extent that deviance is not just relegated but often punished and removed. As Hearn states, “a huge and oppressive structure of law and custom and ideology is erected by the brotherhood of Man to affirm and protect their potency, a structure which must be actively maintained, because at the heart of male potency lies the intransigent reality of estrangement and uncertainty.”<sup>10</sup> This statement captures the risks involved in the failure of ensuring the production and reproduction of this version of masculinity, limiting contestation, and setting the rules of the game are crucial to ensuring the longevity of benefits within and with relation to society.

Nevertheless, Hearn’s assertion of a brotherhood of man and reality of estrangement and uncertainty, is problematic in that it assumes that men have collectivized to dominate in order to escape some form of alienation. While this is in keeping with a Marxist approach towards gender relations, this does not consider the formal, informal, or intended, unintended formation of groups within masculinity that would alleviate estrangements from the ‘normal’. It is also problematic in analyzing the power structures within ‘deviant’ groups such as the various components within the LGBTQ community. Plus, in the hypothetical scenario where power and resources need to be consolidated and dominated, it would be a stronger guarantee against uncertainty and utilizing of resources if the definition of ‘normal’ masculinity is expanded rather than limited to include a wider range of masculinities. Nevertheless, this power and ability to define masculinity is crucial. In the light of the masculinity in crisis narrative the motivations and perceptions towards this ‘normal’

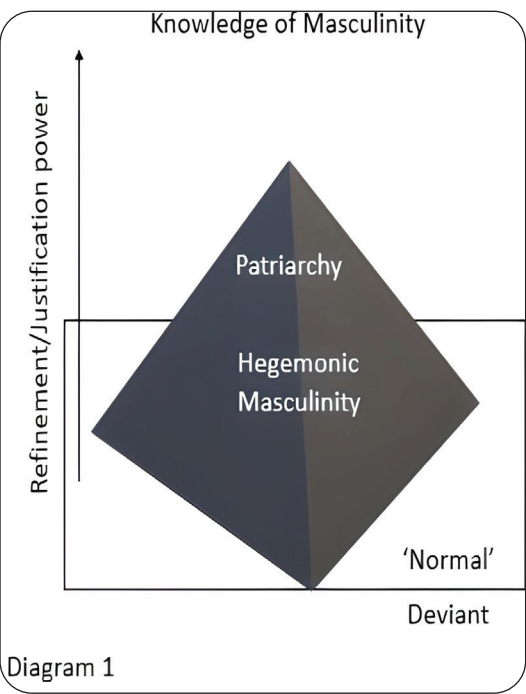
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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Hearn, *The Gender of Oppression: Men, Masculinity, and the Critique of Marxism* (Cambridge: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987), p. 80.

masculinity however needs to be further analyzed.

Given the constructed nature of masculinity, the notion of hegemonic masculinity remains a relevant and viable analytical tool in understanding the boundary making between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ as well as the need for differential power within masculinity and gender relations in reproducing the pyramid of notions surrounding the ‘normal’ masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity understood as a “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”<sup>11</sup>



‘Normal’ masculinity as a result of the exercise of differentiated power in creating a bounded description and interpretation of masculinity is often asserted as the dominant form (Diagram 1). This establishment of a hegemonic and ‘normal’ masculinity is embedded into various roles and relationships as well as institutions to both justify and protect these notions, “hegemony is likely to be

established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power,

<sup>11</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power...*

collective if not individual.”<sup>12</sup>

For instance, the role of a husband in the relationship with a spouse is supported by the institutions of marriage that carries with it protections over the powers invested in this role as well as justifying it through an intersection with other institutions such as religion. Therefore, the rights and responsibilities of a husband under the rubric of ‘normal’ masculinity is justified and protected through Islam and underpins the relationship between husband and wife. “The artifice of family has played an essential role in policing and promoting very specific gender roles. It’s worth mentioning that no matter how egalitarian the relationship between man and woman may be before marriage, their specified roles after marriage are not so easily challenged.”<sup>13</sup>

In this example, there exists several predefined notions that help to support hegemonic masculinity while at the same time protecting its status. For instance, the renowned Islamist theologian Syed Abdul Ala Mawdudi defined the women’s role as to “manage the household, training and bringing up children in the best possible way and providing her husband and children with the greatest possible comfort and contentment” while the man is “responsible for earning and providing the necessities of life for this wife and children and for protecting them from all the vicissitudes of life.”<sup>14</sup>

Islam as the qualifying institution already excludes same sex relationships and includes hierarchical interpretations between a husband and wife (Diagram 2). Marriage is part of the mechanism for social control “family and married life were excellent means for Mawdudi’s argument for social control in that they were central factors in his construction of the Islamic ‘gentlemen’ and ‘lady’.”<sup>15</sup>

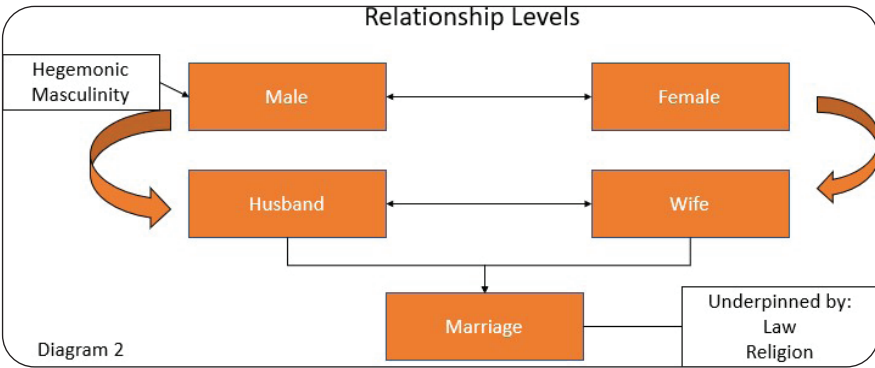
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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Amanullah de Soudy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.



At the same time to qualify for this support, the man needs to conform to agree upon notions of Islamic masculinity such as heterosexuality and being the leader. Therefore, a “Single Muslim man as then understood to be less of a man than his married counterparts. He was incomplete and of less use to his community.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, by extension, a crossdressing bisexual male would find it difficult to be qualify for the support from Islam as well as spouses who also subscribe to the hegemonic masculinity that is in respect to Islam. Indirectly, this promotes the transfer of this knowledge from one generation to the next, as a recipe for success and access to benefits. In the instance that the criteria have been met, the subscription into the set of relations and the adoption of practices that reinforce and reproduce this male power is the essence which makes the pinnacle of relations surrounding hegemonic masculinity, or the patriarchy.

In diagram 1, this is illustrated with the use of a pyramid that itself is located inside the boundary of normal and deviant. It highlights the non-egalitarian nature of masculinity where the more knowledge and refinement one possesses in the display and management of masculinity, the higher is one’s status as an ideal male. The pyramid shape further highlights the increase in power that could be wielded over others through individual or institutional means. This would imply that notions

<sup>16</sup> Amanullah de Soudy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities...*, p. 39.



of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy respectively are located higher up in the pyramid. Within the structure of normal masculinity, the more knowledge one accumulates and displays the more one is in control of boundaries and enforcement of arbitrary notions of the ideal masculine. Diagram 2 on the other hand contextualizes the gender relationship within familial roles of Husband and Wife. These roles are an example of the actualization of femininity and masculinity within an institutionally supported relationship. In this case, marriage, which is underpinned by religious and legal institutions safeguarding the boundaries of rights and authority between husbands and wives. These institutions might not be acting in the same direction however, it provides the net effect of supporting a normative gender relationship supporting hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy.

Discussions surrounding gender relations especially from the Marxist feminist school of thought have often zeroed in on patriarchy as an overarching and leading concept in the oppression and domination of gender relationships both between genders and within masculinity, “by the appropriation of the unwaged labor and energy of women to produce male power.”<sup>17</sup> While notions of patriarchy exist, it is by no means uniform, similar or homogeneous across societies. The meanings attached to it transform and adapt to the changing social landscape, keeping it relevant and a necessary component underpinning gender relation. However, to approach it from the appropriation of unwaged labor and energy of women and perhaps men lower in the hierarchy to produce and reproduce male power provides a view of power from its effects while at the same time allowing for a motivation that is broad enough and allows for adaptations. This understanding of patriarchy further enhances the relevance of the asymmetrical relations in marriage institutions where men seek to control the relationship through the “appropriation of its ‘products’ and products” in this case children and

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<sup>17</sup> Jeff Hearn, *The Gender of Oppression...*

other material goods that could result. By conforming to the accepted rubric of masculinity within fatherhood and the role of the father, the children are appropriated to have the notions of masculinity transferred. For boys as a role model for the right masculinity while for girls it is to underpin desirable traits for men. In both cases these ideal conditions for male power are reproduced.

The element of domination is further strengthened for heterosexual men in the form of structured relations of sexuality. This is done to cement a well-developed relation of control between i) men and women and ii) men and other men who do not conform. “Men’s management and control of heterosexuality and especially hierarchic heterosexuality, in law, organizations, ideologies and activities with the labor necessary for maintaining this management and control”<sup>18</sup> is necessary for heterosexual men to maintain a hierarchy where some men can have access to and claim the rewards of being a ‘normal’ man. In Islam, the primacy of heterosexuality and the construction of sex and gender is centered around procreation, “All things we made in pairs...all the parts of this great machine have been created in pairs, and all that one can see in this world is indeed the result of the mutual interaction of these pairs.”<sup>19</sup>

While heterosexuality is not inherently oppressive it is used as a tool to oppress. The legitimacy borne out of the control of this domain has allowed men, through a form of patriarchy to dominate and exercise control over the body. While at the same time, oppressing behaviors of men who would not be able to claim the unwaged labor of females through homosexual tendencies. This has led to a dualism in relationships where one partner is presented with more options to exercise control and power over the other. In the case of relations between men, a dominant male exists as a result of his social standing, De Soudy theorizes this as the role of the Active Partner and the Passive partner. Where the active

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Amanullah de Soudy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities...*, p. 39.

partner “should possess the ability to act and also (possess) the other masculine qualities so that he may effectively perform the active part of his duty in the sexual relation” while the passive partner “should possess the feminine qualities to an extent that she may carry out the passive part of the sex- relation well.”<sup>20</sup>

A desired effect of creating and enforcing boundaries enables control and monopoly of power to ascend and continue accepted notions of masculinity as well as to oppress notions that do not fit in the constructed reality of ‘normal’ masculinity. Oppression occurs by men on women and children as well as oppression of men “both directly, face to face and in direct and social relations, and indirectly, in the creation of patriarchal institutions, public and private. Different institutional situations offer different forms of oppression of men over women, children and other men.”<sup>21</sup> While oppression of men by women also occurs, it is rarely supported institutionally.

Further, “individual men, although often individually oppressive, are not inherently oppressive, but are rather agents of oppression.”<sup>22</sup> Men’s participation within these institutions renders them at the very least, agents of oppression if not active actors since the power that is wielded within the roles supported by these institutions are taken for granted regardless of the men’s individual agency. This is perhaps, the allowance that is provided within these institutional frames that enables for autonomous expression within the frame. Therefore, allowing for adaptations either within the roles or relationships within the lived reality of the people concerned. “Reproductive labor-powers and labors are organized in patriarchy in ways that are distinct and generalizable, yet particular in time and space.”<sup>23</sup> This allows for fundamentally patriarchal ideas to endure even in the face of mounting overt resistance from

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jeff Hearn, *The Gender of Oppression...*, p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

women and advocacy groups. Its survival involves not just with men but also with the support of women who participate in and subscribe to the underpinning relationship principles. Therefore, the notion of complete masculine domination is not accurate, rather, it is a hegemony in the Gramscian sense with all participants in the relationship being part of and supporting the relationship dynamics. This becomes possible only when there is a measure of consent from the dominated towards the dominants control. This does not indicate however that no two relationships are exactly similar, some analysis and conclusions of this seems to fall into the same fallacy.

Patriarchy, as an effect of masculinity, is often treated as standard, uniform and therefore relies on the same principles to draw its strength. This is a simplification of the complexities of the relationship and the practice of gender roles within the unique intersectionalities of the relationship. By teasing out the more significant intersectionalities this might indicate the authority that is underwriting the institution in which the relationship is founded on. Such as in Diagram 2 where the relationship between the roles of husband and wife are underpinned by the rights and protections afforded by marriage through religious and legal institutions. This example highlights the multi layered nature of male power. While there is an element of hegemony within the relationship even without overt use of force from the dominant. This does not consider the institutional monopoly in the construction of narratives surrounding these institutions. Religious institutions in particular have been a male dominated space, with scholarship being preserved as a male domain leading to accusations from feminists that the interpretations of religious text or sacred scripture is biased towards the advantage of men. While the sacredness of the religion is not often the source of conflict, it is with the interpretations and the supporting of certain narratives over others that seem to factor the domination of men over women in various public and private institutions.

To term masculinity itself as ‘normal’ is problematic as it would preclude a notion of what masculinity should be and that the deterioration or erosion from this ‘standard’ demands analysis and recourse, this has given rise to the debates surrounding masculinity in crisis. On one hand, this has been used by some to initiate a discussion on the changing notions of masculinity, which at the same time embraces multiple masculinities and questions the stereotypes and long held assumptions while on the other, this has also been a rallying call for the urgent reform and address of the decline of ‘normal’ masculinity so as to maintain and strengthen masculinity. Nevertheless, this notion has brought about implications on the conversations around not just masculinity but also femininity and gender relations in general. Undoubtedly, there are various aspects to be unpacked, especially so when one considers the fact that identity is at the intersection of several factors such as religion, ethnicity and citizenship. Notions of masculinity is influenced by and embedded in these different markers of identity. These includes behavior, expectations, responsibilities and roles for a man and woman especially when it comes to family and marriage. However, details of this often lean heavily towards women rather than men “this was in due part due to the male bias that has historically characterized the academic enterprise and in part due to the absence of female scholars in the academy”<sup>24</sup> leading to the greater scrutiny and prescription of female behaviors and roles.

### **At the Intersection**

Similar to other forms of identity, gender and masculinity specifically is multi-faceted and would be shaped by and influenced by various factors that make up identity. This chapter emphasizes ethnicity, religion and citizenship as factors that form an intersection that promotes and enshrines a specific understanding of the ‘ideal’ male.

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<sup>24</sup> Saba Mahmood “Islam and Gender in Muslim Societies in Observing the Observer” Mumtaz Ahmad, Zahid Bukhari and Sulayman Nyang (eds.) *The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities* (Washington DC: IIT, 2012).

The cultural beliefs which form the bedrock of traditional practices for the native ethnicity in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, embraces the relationship between *akal* (mind) and *nafsu* (desire) or the ability to have self-control. In this regard, women are believed to have the tendency to give in to desire while men are believed to have the presence of mind to control theirs. This belief in control then becomes the bedrock for roles and relationships within the context of gender relations. In adolescence men are given more freedom to socialize with limited controls. Young women on the other hand have expectations regarding dress, being at the house late and night as well as other actions that could indicate *nafsu* being allowed to take precedence. Such actions are censured by the family as well as the community. Instead, women are encouraged to stay home, dress modestly and take up responsibilities in the household, whether it is cooking, cleaning or looking after younger siblings. Women are encouraged to be soft-spoken and non-aggressive. This is in direct contrast to males who are given the freedom to express themselves as long as it does not overlap into domains typically occupied by women. By extension, this develops the notion of necessary protection for girls.

This belief in control is also extended into a gendered hierarchy of tasks. Since the ability for control lends more prestige, men would be discouraged to perform certain tasks simply due to its perceived effect on prestige. Bargaining in the market for instance is an activity that would not be viewed as prestigious due to the nature of bargaining, in its exposure of one's emotions as well as the ability of the individual from controlling himself, both from buying items out of his means as well as paying the fair price that has been stated. Therefore, men differ such activities to women who do not have the expectations of prestige placed on them. It is important to note that, one's financial standing is not a direct reflection of male *akal* and therefore prestige, but the actions employed by any individual that makes the case for it. This notion supports a gendered hierarchy and promotes inequality between the sexes.

This gendered roles still exist today as seen in the recent campaign by a supermarket giant, Tesco in Malaysia which offers advice for husbands as the head of the household, Ketua Rumah, to shop at the supermarket. This included diagrams on purchasing chicken and vegetables. While there are fixed prices at the supermarket, this reflects the perceived lack of male involvement in grocery shopping.<sup>25</sup>

While the gendered roles and responsibilities in the household are not uncommon, what is relevant here is the reference to the man as a husband. Implying that firstly such skills and knowledge are lacking in husbands and secondly, men need this information as husbands and not as a means for survival for themselves. Yet women are expected to have this information. This is an example of the reflected way masculinity is defined. Not in its own terms but rather in relation to another.

The nation-state and citizenship also support gendered roles in society as well as providing incentives in ensuring a family unit is kept together where heteronormativity becomes enshrined. Unwed couples, same-sex couples and single parents are faced with hurdles and barriers that would make it difficult for them to compete against 'normal' couples. The State for instance offers tax incentives for men who are head of the family in order to support the notion of a family. Such incentives are not accorded to single mothers or same sex couples. Public housing allocation also favors the 'normal' family unit.

Further, apart from Singapore that repealed marital rape laws in 2019, men remain immune to such charges, thereby supporting the suspension of consent once a woman is married as well as strengthening the narrative of rights and ownership that a man has over a woman. This is part of the privilege of being a man. As much as possible the state supports the establishment of the family unit while at the same

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Sullivan "Don't Nag Your Husband During Lockdown, Malaysia's Government Advises Women," <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/01/825051317/dont-nag-yourhusband-during-lock-down-malaysias-government-advises-women?t=160139356209>, accessed April 1, 2020.

time not wanting to intervene in issues considered as part of the private sphere. Men in Singapore are further given incentives after completing conscripted military service through higher pay packages once they enter the working world. This is a duty of every male Singaporean in which women are exempted, yet, the completion of this service provides incentives that are not accessible to woman. While the state does not outwardly define masculinity, there are discriminative policies and laws against the transgression of a yet explicitly defined masculinity.

Therefore, should masculinity exist within these intersections it produces a net effect of control, power and support in heteronormative gendered relationships. At the same time, it generates attention towards women in terms of conduct and expectation while similar scrutiny is not extended to men. In short, for women there are rules to be followed in order to meet the expectations of one community, while for men any prescriptions are recommended guidelines, in which incentives and privileges are a given unless major transgressions occur, such as homosexuality. As will be further discussed in the next section.

### **Dissecting Masculinities**

The focus on the role of masculinity in the construction of identity has grown over the years. This focus has also forced a closer look at masculinity and considering the fragmented nature of masculinity itself. That it does not exist as a single uniform entity but rather fragmented pieces that make up the whole. Connell has best chartered this in her work on masculinities, which at the most basic level reaffirms the myth of hegemony in the reality of everyday life as man. Much literature leans towards the boundaries placed between masculinity and femininity, as such males that do not meet the expectations of masculinity are relegated and related to closer to the female gender while on the other hand, males also display aspects of hypermasculinity in order to strengthen the



boundaries between masculinity and femininity.<sup>26</sup>

Masculinity is diverse and represents a spectrum opposed to a single consolidated entity, with hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, “hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works.”<sup>27</sup> Depending on factor used as a lens to view this spectrum and individual man might land on different parts. Hypermasculinity for instance might only be exhibited in certain cases, in the presence of transsexuals or crossdressers for instance and less so in everyday circumstances. These situational conditions would be heavily reliant on the interaction and constant construction of reality in any given situation, nevertheless, a toolkit of principles and responses exist transmitted through social institutions in boundaries of ‘normal’ masculinity. These boundaries are of course also an intersection of religion, ethnicity, culture and citizenship but the common principles and reactions cuts across this intersectionality is not a mere coincidence. It represents triumph in the ability for the representation of masculinity that is coherent across the different situations and intersections that one may face.

The intersection between gender, ethnicity and religion transposes certain fundamental beliefs onto schools where structured learning is taking place not just by way of content but also through the segregation of knowledge, attributes and traits that is expected to be developed to support the boundary making process in delineating hegemonic masculinity, masculinity and femininity. This produces an expected hierarchy between genders and within gender. This hierarchy reflects the traits needed to identify to claim male power over institutions and the

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Pleck “Men’s Power with Women, Other Men and Society: A Men’s Movement Analysis,” in Michael Kimmel & Michael Messner (eds.) *Men’s Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power*..., p. 183.

community making this segregation taken for granted and accepted as the way society is supposed to work. This is reflected in the different roles that one must assume throughout the life course. The effectiveness of the transfer of this reality lies in the fact that across roles and institutions there is a general coherence and agreement in the attributes that make up or don't make up hegemonic masculinity that is unquestioned and accepted. The net effect of the intersection provides for easy Identification of a 'normal' male for both men and women, not only through the identification of traits that are masculine but in identification of traits that fall outside of 'normal'. One might not be identifying the strength of a male but one can definitely identify he masculine based on traits he does not exhibit.

### **Ideology vs Reality**

The constantly changing dynamics of masculinity construction also poses challenges to men when there is a lack of coherence across the different intersectionalities. This is especially true in relation to the divergence between everyday experience and the boundaries within hegemonic masculinity or its promise of reward for the loyal. When there is enough coherence across the representative and significant intersections, there is widespread acceptance of the boundaries that represent the 'normal' and therefore, adoption is unquestioned. However, when there are deviances within the intersections, incoherence creeps in allowing for contestations. Without critical mass these contestations will seek to challenge and possibly alter the very definition of hegemonic masculinity thereby threatening the access and legitimacy of power of those who have benefited from it.

Therefore, within the significant intersection of gender, religion and ethnicity, there needs to be a collective understanding of the 'normal' between these institutions such as '*akal*' and '*nafsu*'. This belief exists in both ethnicity and religion and is therefore easily absorbed and adopted

into schools as an unchallenged reality. This is made easier when religion and ethnicity are so in sync there are equated to one and the same, such as Malay-Muslim, where the status of a Malay who is not Muslim becomes controversial and questioned as deviant. In the case of heterosexuality, Islamic narratives supporting it and opposing homosexuality is clear, therefore when there are challenges to this opposition from the intersection with citizenship this creates and challenge to coherence. If homosexuality gains the same status legally and socially this would be in opposition to the ethnicity/ religion intersection as well as challenging the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity and by extension access to male power. This issue further creates and incoherence in the male domination over biological reproduction, gendered roles and the control over women's bodies. As Hearn theorized this prevents the appropriation of unwaged labor by men and the claims over the products of reproduction such as children. This threatens the male power to set the agenda for defining 'normal' as well as reproducing the power is drawn hegemonic masculinity for the next generation.

Brenner in her study of Javanese marriages highlights the multi layered impact of women participating in the economy. Her study has looked at the depths of the ideology surrounding husband and wife relationships and its divergence from reality. The relationship is underpinned by the '*akal*' and '*nafsu*' dichotomy that is prevalent in the Indonesian archipelago. However, in the Javanese tradition men's claim to '*akal*' comes from "a common belief among Javanese people that individuals have the potential to develop a concentration of inner spiritual strength through the sustained practice of emotional and behavioral self-control."<sup>28</sup> In this instance the calmer the demeanor of the man the higher is his attainment of hegemonic masculinity. The hierarchical nature of

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<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Brenner "Why Women Rule the Roost: Rethinking Javanese Ideologies of Gender and Self-Control" Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz (eds.), *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (California: University of California Press, 1995), p. 20.

Javanese society means that men of regular standing would not be able to achieve the highest levels of masculinity, nevertheless performances of this nature help to associate one with this aspirational class in order to be regarded as conforming to hegemonic masculinity. Brenner defines this as “models that support the claims of a particular category of people to superior status and power, models which are most likely to be invoked in formal discourse and which are most often accorded a position of supremacy among other, potentially competing models.”<sup>29</sup>

As prior discussed, hegemonic masculinity provides an access to male power that is exclusive to men. Therefore, in this setting it was especially important to display the significant symbols of masculinity in social interactions. When it comes to trading in the marketplace then, where haggling, aggressiveness and loud voices are commonplace, this poses a dilemma. An incoherence between the masculine traits that are deemed desirable and the fundamental need to trade for goods and services as part of everyday living. This ideology has encouraged women to be the participants as both a seller and a buyer in the marketplace. The role of consumer in the marketplace is of course an extension of their roles as managers of the household. Except due to the ideology of masculinity in Javanese society, men who wish to ascend the pyramid of masculinity to achieve greater access to male power have excluded themselves from the act of trading, deferring instead to their wives. This has given the wives a window into public life, financial independence and autonomy. In some cases, the wives are much better at handling money over their husbands that all income earned in the family is transferred to the wife for appropriation. This contributes to the de-facto leadership status of the with in running the household.

Nevertheless, the title of head still falls on the husband though he is merely a figurehead at this point in time with no real power to influence the affairs of the household. This is an extreme example of the

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<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Brenner “Why Women Rule the Roost...,” p. 21.

differences between ideology and reality for households. In this example, it is apparent that the wife wields considerable power, yet she does not receive the acknowledgement or full independence of acting as a leader. Instead, she must defer this to her husband whose contribution to the household is a strong spiritual potency. Therefore, while he has developed his '*akal*' it does not count for any real influence on the everyday life of the man and his family. This leads to an incoherence which eventually climaxes with the realization that the wife is the head and allowing her to make the decisions, a counter response to try and seize power from the wife or to reject all the institutions that make up the intersection completely.

Peletz in his study of Malay communities in Negeri Sembilan, observed '*akal*' and '*nafsu*' being used as justifications to delineate men and women. At the same time, he observed the differences between ideological understandings of masculinity and its realistic portrayal. In this community however, the possession of '*akal*' is not an issue of spiritual potency but is rather borne out of nurturing of children through Quranic recitation and disciplined ritual prayer, "the cultivation of 'reason' through concentration and various types of mental and spiritual exercises entailing studied restraint facilitates proper prayer and other forms of religiously valued and morally virtuous behavior."<sup>30</sup> Boys are brought through this system in order for them to obtain the lessons necessary to lead their future families and the community. The '*nafsu*' on the other hand is a natural element that is predominant in women in that there has been less ability to control themselves and are prone to gossip and desiring material possessions, thereby making them unfit as leaders, thereby excluding them from politics and affairs of state. Their biological traits are also used as exclusion from '*akal*' training as they are not able to keep themselves

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Peletz "Neither Reasonable nor Responsible: Contrasting Representations of Masculinity in Malay Society," in Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz (eds.) *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (California: University of California Press, 1995), p. 92.

as pure as boys. Peletz found that the reality of this was very different, “practical representations of gender portray men as much less reliable uncommitted to their wives, children and other relatives. They also depict men as fond of gambling, alcohol, overly inclined to purchase on credit and thus less restrained.”<sup>31</sup>

However Peletz goes a step further in understanding the lack of challenge to the male domination by women since men are liabilities in the marriage, “women appear to accept as valid much of the official discourse on gender, including numerous features of the discourse that portray women (and females generally) in culturally devalued terms.”<sup>32</sup> This acceptance of male domination is not just a belief in the ideological perfection of men but also of the seemingly imperfection of women where they are not equal to men and cannot exceed men even if they were to become the stronger partners in the relationship. By extension this ideology is successful in marginalizing and oppressing women from positions of political power that might allow them to structurally change the relations between the genders thereby leaving the reproduction of these relations unchallenged and unchanged from one generation to the next. Unlike the Brenner case, the men are more institutionally protected in this community and would require little to no effort as claiming access to male power.

When elements and the strength of masculinity is a result of the net effect of intersectionality, a conflict in one domain leads to a contestation of the promise of masculinity and this uncertainty leads to the questioning of all the different components of the intersection. This results in a challenge to hegemonic masculinity from within the boundary and threatens the male power hierarchy. The challenge comes from the inability of men to now access the means to male power under the current rubric of hegemonic masculinity. With such a challenge some

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

components of the intersection of significance would rise to a greater importance than others as men seek to find a refined source of legitimacy to justify their claims to male power.

## **Conclusion**

The masculinity in crisis narrative is perhaps the strongest response to the growing sense of unease on the challenges to hegemonic masculinity on multiple fronts. After decades of economic growth in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, women are integral members of the workforce as well as contributors to the household economy. The knock-on effects have led to expanded educational prospects and greater calls for women's participation in public life. Women now have the autonomy and independence to challenge the spaces that use to be the preserve of men. Yet, men have clung on to the access to power, by emphasizing gender roles and the dependence of men. Narratives that focus on men's place at the head of the household and by extension the community have grown louder. These narratives have relied on the stability of hegemonic masculinity and the historical achievements of boundary making in which the exclusivity of masculinity was clear and uncontested.

However, the challenge to masculinity is not only from its external boundaries that separate male and female but also from within masculinity itself. Growing challenges to heterosexuality, the role of fathers in the development of children as well as men who do not fit into the image depicted by hegemonic masculinity being held up as examples of the 'new normal' challenges the conception of hegemonic masculinity especially at the significant interactions. Most significantly this presents a challenge to the coherence that has been inculcated, threatening not just hegemonic masculinity but the eco system of institutions that have underwritten the access to male power and patriarchy. While hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy are not organisms with its own will and agency, there are agents of oppression that have responded to this challenge of the challenge to

the fundamentals of the ‘normal’ man in order to safeguard the interests of the status quo. Most notably, the effect of establishing a ‘normal’ masculinity backed by the net effect of one of or in combination to these social institutions not only ensures the reproduction of the gendered order but the multiple institutional frameworks working coherently ensures an obscurity in identifying the true power behind the hegemonic masculine roles within these institutions. When there is cooperation and coherence between the sources that support this gender order, it becomes more difficult to challenge and to change the status quo. As such, while the fundamentals of masculinity have been observed, the obscuring of masculinities legitimacy and by extension power, is harder to observe and to challenge.

Above all, the intersection of gender, culture, religion and State has been used effectively to provide a net effect that supports masculine domination and enshrines the access to power of hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, the complexity of the intersection both requires the maintenance of the respective institutions that have underwritten the relations of power of this gender order as well as allows for the flexibility of domination in the face of changing circumstances in society. Most importantly, the diffusion of the guarantors of male power enables for a level of obscurity as to its source. Allowing the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity and the ‘normal’ man to slip into the powerful a powerful ahistorical and institutionally agnostic and regarded as taken for granted and ‘natural’.



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