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Cyberbullying of Muslim Celebrities: The Pressure to Conform to 'Modest' Islam | FULCRUM

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Celebrity Laudya Cynthia Bella in a Facebook post on 12 February, 2022. (Photo: Laudya Cynthia Bella/ Facebook)

Recent indications of increased cyberbullying of female Muslim celebrities by vigilante commentators suggest a need for governments and authorities to be more proactive in encouraging moderation in online forums. Failure to control such hostility could lead to serious repercussions on the affected individuals.

A small but noisy group of vigilante netizens in Southeast Asia increasingly expects Muslim celebrities and social media influencers to conform to strict Islamic religious codes. This policing comes not from religious authorities per se, but is a form of social discipline expressed through certain followers' comments on these personalities' social media platforms. The commentators justify their statements with the concept of *amar makruf dan nahi munkar*. These Quranic principles generally command Muslims to be the best of people, promoting virtues (*makruf*) and forbidding vices (*munkar*). Thus, all Muslims must uphold these principles. Originally applied in the past to prevent fraudulent and unjust transactions between traders and consumers in business operations, the concept has now been hijacked by online vigilante groups to degrade, embarrass, and criticise what they consider to be transgressions of personal morality.

Misogyny is also at work: Muslim female celebrities are the prime targets of these netizen vigilante groups. Social media platforms such as Instagram have become sites of friction between those who believe that it is their moral duty to 'advise' these celebrities and those who oppose such interference. Muslim women's bodies and appearance have been cast in the spotlight due to the resurgence of Islamic values and beliefs in Southeast Asian Muslim societies. Among the most visible and potent symbols of this renewed Islamic awakening is the wearing of veils. Many Muslim female celebrities are donning the *hijab* and sharing about their newfound piety with their followers on social media. For example, Neelofa and Laudya Cynthia Bella, among the biggest names in Malaysian and Indonesian entertainment, respectively, have radically transformed their previously 'sexy' images into decidedly *Muslimah* (observant Muslim woman) looks. Both women have shared their transformation with the media, couched as their *hijrah* (migration; also a religious term referencing the Prophet Muhammed's flight from Mecca to Medina) from a liberal Western lifestyle to a religiously acceptable way of life. These celebrities have become even more popular since their 'transformation'; both have launched successful *Muslimah* fashion businesses that have benefitted from their increased popularity.

In contrast, celebrities who do not conform to these expectations, especially those who choose not to wear the veil, often bear the brunt of criticism. Recently, [Sarah Hildebrand](#), an American-Malaysian actress, announced her retirement from the industry due to the 'daily online abuse' she received from netizens. She was vilified because she used to wear the *hijab* but decided to shed it.

Moreover, the 'vocal minority' has the loudest voices and may influence public perception by normalising intolerance and hostility towards those who are perceived to be different from them.

The only saving grace for Malaysian celebrities is that such commentators are not in the majority. It is [reported](#) that there were approximately 28 million users of social media in Malaysia as of January 2021, representing about 86 per cent of the total population. While no concrete statistics are available, these extreme commentators are the 'vocal minority' who thrive on fostering negativity online. At the same time, the 'silent majority' are content with looking away if they disagree with any online content that goes against their personal beliefs. A recent [study](#) reported that the vast majority of social media users never or rarely post or share about political or social issues. Furthermore, those with relatively moderate views are more reluctant to participate in online discussions. This suggests that online platforms are becoming increasingly popular for promoting extreme views. If moderate voices do not enter the same frame to counter them, then the discourse will be one-sided in favour of the extremists.

The impact of social media on social and religious trends in Southeast Asia must not be discounted, even if there is unequal access to Internet connectivity across the region. Social media culture is often described as 'toxic', and there are countless reports about the severe repercussions on [mental health](#) caused by its uncontrolled use. The problem is particularly acute in [South Korea](#) and Japan, where intense cyberbullying by netizens has resulted in some celebrities dying by suicide. There is no known case of suicide among Muslim celebrities in Southeast Asia due to cyberbullying so far, despite Malaysia being ranked second in Asia for cyberbullying in an international [survey](#).

The 'vocal minority' has the loudest voices and may influence public perception by normalising intolerance and hostility towards those who are perceived to be different. Social media engagement is increasingly seen as a barometer of a society's attitudes, beliefs and aspirations. There should be a concerted effort by the authorities in the region to educate social media users on the importance of being sensitive to others and not forcing their

ideas of how Muslim women should look or behave upon the latter. [Charles Ess](#) suggests that digital media users should be taught to have a sense of 'epistemological humility' regarding their beliefs, norms, and practices — in other words, they must learn that their 'ways' may not necessarily 'work' for everyone else. Unbridled social media use could lead to severe impacts on mental health and foment extreme ideologies, which make prioritising efforts to steer online content and narratives towards moderation an urgent need.

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