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In December 2023, student activists held a press conference protesting the University of Malaysia guidelines to challenge the separation of male and female students at gyms and concerts on campuses. (Photo by Fairuz Azmi/ Facebook)

Inclusivity or Division? The Unintended Consequences of Non-Segregated Gyms

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A controversy in Malaysia about segregated gym hours has led to a conflation of Islamic tenets with an inherent obstruction to gender equality.

An increased amount of attention has been paid to the dynamics that exist inside public spaces as society continues to make progress towards equality and inclusivity. A powerful illustration of this is in Malaysia, where student activists from the University of Malaya have opposed rules for [segregated gym hours](#). The students' use of religiously-charged terms against segregation in public spaces belies the fact that there are rational and reasonable reasons for such practices.

In December 2023, the student activists held a press conference protesting university [guidelines](#) to challenge the separation of male and female students at gyms and concerts on campuses. This follows the distribution of a video clip that showed male and female students dancing at an event organised by a public university in [Terengganu](#). The Department of Higher Education was alleged to have released guidelines on concerts before the then-minister of higher education shared his views that university students should be empowered to decide on such matters. It is in this context that the so-called segregation policies were passed during the University of Malaya's [Student Congress](#).

A month later in January 2024, a [video clip](#) of the news conference, which was conducted in Mandarin, gained widespread circulation on social media. Almost all attendees at the event were from the Chinese media and expressed a preference for the event to be conducted in Mandarin. The addition of English subtitles to the video garnered significant attention, particularly among the Malay community. Although the protest was primarily aimed at the specific policies of the University of Malaya, the video's dissemination resulted in it becoming a prominent news story.

The seemingly innocuous character of the press conference took a controversial turn due to the students' assertion that such "segregation" is the result of religious conservatism in Malaysia. Furthermore, they alleged that the university was a breeding ground for "Islamic extremism." On social media, supporters of non-segregation even called out the supposed "Talibanisation" of Malaysia.

In Malaysia, where religious beliefs are deeply entwined with cultural identities, the challenge lies in striking a harmonious balance between advancing equality without vilifying religious practices by listening to those who are making such requests.

The [primary criticism](#) levelled against the student activists is that they used terminology that may or may not represent the majority Muslim population in Malaysia or those attending the University of Malaya. Using words such as "extremism" and "Talibanisation" to describe the misinterpretation of users' concerns diminishes the significance of these words. It also downplays the experiences and privations of women in Afghanistan who are forbidden to go to school or work. In Malaysia, these "segregations" do not infringe on the rights of citizens to participate in social activities. The negative portrayal only exacerbates

religious polarisation among the youth when the matter is largely non-religious in nature.

In trying to project the issue as one of growing Islamic fundamentalism, these students may have failed to take into account the concerns of gym-going women. In a study of 2,000 adults in the United Kingdom, [61 per cent of women](#) expressed a preference for exercising in a space exclusively designated for females. The gym is where individuals seek to improve their health and well-being. For some, the separation of genders in this space provides a safe and comfortable environment away from judgmental eyes. Since this survey was done in the UK, it cannot be blamed on any form of Islamic fundamentalism. The rising numbers of women-only gyms in other parts of the world such as [South Korea](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) also points to the demand for such spaces.

The argument that segregation stems primarily from Islamic fundamentalism is faulty. In other countries, the drive for segregated public spaces has stemmed from other motivations. Cairo introduced women-only carriages in 2000 to protect women from harassment. Japan implemented women-only carriages as early as 1912, specifically for schoolgirls during peak hours. As a non-Muslim nation, the implementation of the women-only carriages in the Japanese metro was lauded in the early 2000s in response to a significant increase in recorded occurrences of chikan (subway sexual harassment). In Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia, women's only coaches were introduced to trains for similar safety reasons.

While women-only carriages and segregated gym hours present themselves as mitigative strategies against gender-based dangers, their efficacy in addressing the root causes of misogyny within society is, at best, [marginal](#). In Cairo's case, the implementation of women-only carriages sparked a discussion on [women's roles in public spaces](#) and how segregated public transportation could entrench gender differences in conservative Egypt. Regardless, women's voices asking for safety and comfort should be heard. Freedom of speech is not just about the right to speak up; it is also about the right to be heard.

The conflation of Islamic tenets with an inherent obstruction to gender equality is a reductive narrative that lacks sensitivity to the interwoven cultural, religious, and social dynamics at play. In Malaysia, where religious beliefs are deeply entwined with cultural identities, the challenge lies in striking a harmonious balance between advancing equality without vilifying religious practices by listening to those who are making such requests.

As highlighted by the student leader in his media response, the implementation of separate gym hours may pose an inconvenience due to the individual [schedules of students](#). Moreover, such a request could impose additional responsibilities on gym administrators. Therefore, a more productive dialogue may have been initiated to discover an optimal resolution. For example, given its wide 750-acre (3 square

kilometres) campus, the university has the capacity to accommodate separate, unrestricted gyms for both males and ladies.

In a [polarised Malaysia](#), youth play a bigger role in shaping the future through constructive engagement rather than fuelling religious and racial prejudices. Such an approach necessitates a concerted and inclusive discussion that respects diversity and fosters solidarity among disparate groups. This entails not only recognising the importance of free speech and advocacy but also ensuring that the voices of all are acknowledged and amplified.

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