

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN MALAYSIA

JANUARY 2021

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Executive Summary

Background

Female circumcision is viewed as an issue by some, and a non-issue by others, especially the practicing community. In the Malaysian context, female circumcision is viewed as both a cultural and a religious practice. This qualitative study seeks to understand the practice of female circumcision by looking at media representations of the practice in Malaysia diachronically.

Main Findings

Malay and English online news articles from the year 2015 to 2020 were analysed to identify the prominent keywords, social actors, thematic frames and arguments present in those articles. The online news articles were examined first to understand the diachronic pattern of reporting. It was found that the topic was most actively reported on in the years 2018 and 2019 for both Malay and English news articles, evidently due to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Malaysian government's response towards remarks received from the UPR committee. English alternative news sites (*Free Malaysia Today* and *MalaysiaKini*) were found to report on female circumcision more frequently compared to the mainstream news sites (*New Straits Times* and *The Star*). The Malay news sites reporting on female circumcision were more diversified, comprising various mainstream and alternative news sites, but were fewer in number compared to the English news sites.

A corpus-assisted approach and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software were used to aid the analysis. It was found that voices of authorities were given the most prominence in reporting. Voices of people related to the practice were backgrounded and their roles were more often passivated. A more detailed textual analysis was done to examine the representations of female circumcision in the Malaysian online news media. For the English news articles, the three most salient representations were female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis, female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, and female circumcision as a mild practice. The English news articles largely reported the contestation of the practice, but the arguments presented by proponents of the practice were inevitably featured because the voices that were given prominence were those of the authorities, who mostly endorse female circumcision. Malay news articles predominantly represented female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, as a separate concept from female genital mutilation (FGM), and as a practice that is devoid of religious basis. Interestingly, one of the most prominent representations for both Malay and English news

articles is that female circumcision is a practice that has cultural roots. Despite this similarity, Malay news sites carried more arguments that endorsed the practice compared to the English news sites.

Recommendations

A discursive media-based space to establish awareness and education

The implication of the findings is that as a result of conflicting discourses and clashing (de)legitimation by different authorities, there needs to be a discursive space that establishes an awareness-raising and educational media campaign, which is backed by authorities considered reliable by the practicing community.

Avoid oversaturation of discussion from the perspective of human rights

Other than that, the backgrounding of the voices of the practicing community and oversaturation of the 'Westernised' human rights perspective implies an echo chamber or epistemic bubble which can result in the reinforcement of the rejection of such perspectives.

Include voices and narratives from the practicing community

This gap can be addressed by diversifying voices in the media and moving towards an inclusionary approach by including voices of the practicing community to get to the root of the problem. Key to this is enabling a space to hear the voices and narratives of/by/on women who are involved and engaged in the practice.

Focus on localised and contextualized appeals

Additionally, the media must shift the focus of awareness-raising and educational media campaigns to a more localised and contextualised situation to suit and appeal to the masses, especially the majority of the practicing community who currently see no issue regarding the practice. The media plays a crucial role in raising awareness and educating their consumers regarding female circumcision and reframing the reporting narrative to include the larger debate of Islamic bioethics, among others. Advocacy and policy making must inevitably engage with the media to initiate social change.

Report Team

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1

Research Background

1.1 Introduction

Different terms have been used to refer to the practice of female circumcision that is commonly known as ‘*sunat*’, ‘*khatan*’, or ‘*khitan*’ by the practicing Muslim Malay community in Malaysia. The term ‘female circumcision’ is often used interchangeably with female genital mutilation, female genital excision and female genital cutting in some sources (e.g., Rashid & Iguchi, 2019; Hayford & Trinitapoli, 2011; Isa et al., 1999). The more recent studies that look into female circumcision in Malaysia used the term ‘female genital cutting’ to refer to the practice (see Rashid et al., 2020; Rashid & Iguchi, 2019). As an umbrella term, female genital mutilation (FGM) involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, as well as other types of deliberately inflicted injuries to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The WHO classifies FGM into four types (Female Genital Mutilation, 2020) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *The four types of female genital mutilation*

| Types of FGM | Definition |
|--------------|---|
| Type I | Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce |
| Type II | Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora |
| Type III | Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris |
| Type IV | All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization |

Note: Adapted from World Health Organization’s website (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>)

Malaysia is reported to predominantly practice Type IV though Type I is increasingly practiced by medical practitioners (Rashid et al., 2020). This could be justified by the lack of medical guidelines that outline the procedure for those conducting the practice. The practice of female circumcision in Malaysia is premised on several reasons, mainly cultural and religious. The practice is said to

predate Islam, but according to Isa et al. (1999), there is no evidence that female circumcision was practiced before the arrival of Islam in Malaysia. This differs from the situation in Egypt, in which the practice does predate the arrival of Islam (and Christianity), thus, making the practice a cultural one.

Over the years, Malaysia has attempted to regulate the practice through several courses of action. In 2018, representatives from the Malaysian government including the then Minister of Women, Family and Community Development stated that the practice of female circumcision is a cultural obligation, denying that it is a form of FGM. In 2009, the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs issued a *fatwa* that declared the practice of female circumcision as a religious obligation. The issuance of this *fatwa* served to reinforce the belief of Muslim women in Malaysia in the necessity of this practice. The study by Isa et al. (1999) showed that most of their research participants believed that female circumcision is an encouraged religious practice. Rashid and Iguchi (2019) revealed that by 2019, this belief had solidified into a conviction that the practice is compulsory. Following the issuance of the *fatwa*, the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs was tasked with developing a standardised guideline for medical practitioners. However, the guideline has not been widely circulated. In fact, the medical curriculum does not include any form of training on the practice of female circumcision (Rashid et al., 2020).

Malaysia's attempt to regulate the practice has contravened the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals agenda (Dawson et al., 2020). The latest academic research on female circumcision in Malaysia is a mixed-methods study published by Rashid et al. (2020) using self-administered questionnaires and interviews to investigate the medicalisation of female circumcision in Malaysia. This study is a pivotal piece of work as it is the first one to unveil the actual practice of medicalised female circumcision in Malaysia. It revealed that though medicalisation is one of the intervention strategies used to eliminate the practice of FGM, the strategy seems to have backfired in Malaysia due to the application of a more invasive type of FGM, Type I, in Malaysia alongside the existing, and hitherto more common, Type IV. With access to anaesthetics and knowledge of anatomy and physiology, the doctors may perform more extensive and deeper cuts, unlike the traditional midwives. Thus, Rashid et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of Malaysian medical authorities establishing a firm position in addressing the medicalisation of female circumcision in Malaysia.

A mixed-methods study combining a questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions was published by Rashid and Iguchi (2019) to understand the views of the Malaysian Muslim community, traditional practitioners, and religious scholars regarding the practice of female circumcision. A similar study was conducted by Isa et al. (1999), though it only focused on the views of the Malaysian Muslim community, specifically women who were from rural areas in Kelantan. Both studies show that the participants wanted the practice of female circumcision to continue for different reasons.

In relation to the religious aspect of the practice, Ainslie (2015) discussed the issue of ownership of Islamic discourses in Malaysia and the implications of the national *fatwa* issued in 2009. The conclusion derived from the discussion in Ainslie (2015) was that the issue of female circumcision in Malaysia was in a state of impasse due to the political climate of the country at that point in time. An open dialogue was rather unlikely then under Najib Razak's government, given the government's attempt to indirectly reinforce their political authority through the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs.

However, as seen in the past five years, especially in the years after the historic collapse of *Barisan Nasional's* long-standing reign, there have been more open discussions on the practice of female circumcision in the media. Moving forward, Ainslie (2015) asserted that a common ground can be reached to address the issue of female circumcision if the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Health can work together. Given the current political situation and the uncertainties that have arisen due to the pandemic, however, cooperation between the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Health is less likely to be viable immediately.

At present, there is no known research that specifically looks at the media representation of female circumcision in Malaysia. Media texts, similar to other texts, can be "sites of struggle" where

“traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance” can be identified (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 12). Debates surrounding the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia have revolved around various aspects, particularly culture, gender, health, human rights, and religion. The ambivalence regarding the practice of female circumcision is evident in media texts, with views voiced by various stakeholders that may both legitimise and delegitimise the practice. An analysis of media representation would reveal the voices that are given prominence, and those that are erased in the reporting. Moving forward, this may help in shaping the national discourse that Malaysia should support to address the ambiguity of the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia.

1.2 Research objectives

In relation to the gap in research on the media representation of female circumcision in Malaysia, the overarching aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which the English and Bahasa Malaysia mainstream and alternative media represent the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia. To this end, the study has the following objectives:

- 1) To examine the diachronic patterns and trends in the ways in which Malay and English news reports frame the practice in Malaysia.
- 2) To examine how the people involved in the practice are represented in the media and by related stakeholders.
- 3) To examine the ways in which the practice is (de)legitimized in the news reports and by related stakeholders.

1.3 Research questions

Based upon the objectives in 1.2, three research questions were addressed in this study:

- 1) What are the key frames used to report on the practice in the Malaysian mainstream and alternative Malay and English news media?
This question focuses upon first identifying which thematic frames exist in the news reports, and then, examining which frames have been significant over the years.
- 2) How are the people associated with the practice talked about in the Malaysian mainstream and alternative Malay and English news media?
This question focuses upon the ways in which the social actors associated with the practice are represented by the media and by related stakeholders, emphasizing specifically the ways in which women and girls are positioned by the reports and the stakeholders. In relation to the media, the media representation of the social actors will reveal the voices of the people who are privileged, marginalised, or erased in the reporting.
- 3) What types of argument strategies are used to (de)legitimize the practice and the people involved with it?
This question focuses upon the strategies used to frame and legitimize (or possibly even de-legitimize) the practice in the news reports and by related stakeholders.

1.4 Research methodology

This study is a diachronic examination of the trends and patterns of the reporting on the practice in Malaysian mainstream and alternative news sites.

1.4.1 Data type and data collection

The data for this study comprised news reports from various mainstream and alternative online news sites in Malaysia. The English news sites that were selected consisted of mainstream (*New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *The Malay Mail*) and alternative (*Free Malaysia Today* and *MalaysiaKini*) ones. Similarly, the Malay news reports were selected from both mainstream (*Astro Awani*, *Berita Harian*, *Harian Metro* and *Utusan*), as well as alternative news sources (*Free Malaysia Today*, *Harakah Daily*, *Lobak Merah*, *Malaysiakini*, *Mingguan Wanita*, *Sihat Malaysia*, *mStar*, *SAYS*, *The Malaysian Parent* and *The Malaysian Parent*). All types of reports on the practice in the Malaysian mainstream and alternative online news sites from the years 2015 to 2020 were collected. Data were collected from 2016 to 2020 for the English news sites whereas for the Malay news sites, data were gathered from 2015 to 2020 due to the limited number of articles available. The data were sourced from different Malaysian online news sites, in both English and Bahasa Malaysia, through keyword searches on search engines and individual news sites.

The keywords used for the searches were developed through the 'trial and error' method. Other than that, links that were directed to related articles also helped the process of sourcing the data. The searches yielded a total of 55 articles for the English news sites and 20 articles for the Malay news sites. The articles were all converted into text files format first, then cleaned up to obtain relevant parts that relate to the topic. Following this, the articles were run through a corpus software and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software for corpus-assisted analysis and textual analysis.

1.4.2 Analytical framework

The analytical framework of the study focuses on the analysis of four main elements:

- A. Keyword analysis
- B. Frames
- C. Social actors
- D. Argumentation strategies

A. Keyword analysis

Keyword analysis is the first step in the data analysis process that enables identification of salient words from the news reports and focus group discussion transcripts. Keyword analysis shows the pattern of discourse through generation of word list and frequency of words, indexing words based on their occurrence. Identification of words that are significant by their frequency (and erasure) gives a preliminary insight into the data set before locating the thematic frames and identifying the argumentation strategies. It also provides a diachronic insight into the differences and similarities in reporting of the topic over the years.

The data can be visualised into a word cloud to illustrate the media representation of the practice over the years. Reports are first saved and converted into a text file format, then run through a corpus software and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Keyword analysis using software will show the following:

- The word list of all the words in the data set
- The frequency count of all words in the data set
- The top occurring words in the data set
- The word cloud visualising the top occurring content words in the data set

B. Frame analysis

Frame analysis involves identification of thematic frames from the news reports. It showcases how an issue is represented through selection, emphasis and presentation of theories, facts, and information. Identification of thematic frames involves three steps. Firstly, repetition of patterns in the news coverage

of female circumcision is identified. Then, broad forms of emphasis and selection of information are examined, and the master narratives are determined. The analysis will reveal what is covered and not covered in the media reporting.

C. Analysis of social actors

Social actors or entities in this study were interpreted as either individuals or organized groups, who were in one way or another involved or discussed and featured in the media reports. A study of the social actors represented in the media and in the focus groups would serve to reveal the attitudes, interaction, actions and reactions of these social actors and the ways in which they are given or not given prominence in the framing of the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia.

D. Analysis of argumentation strategies

Argumentation strategies refers to the means by which arguments on an issue are premised and legitimised or delegitimised. The strategies that were focused on to analyse the (de)legitimation of the practice include authority (de)legitimisations, rationalisation (de)legitimisations and moral evaluation (de)legitimisations (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

1.5 Structure of the report

The first section of this report describes the context of the study which uncovers issues surrounding female circumcision as practised in Malaysia, followed by an elaboration on the current research gap, the rationale for conducting this research, the focus of the study, and its methodology. The second section presents the findings of the representations of female circumcision in both English and Malay newspapers. The third section will discuss the overall findings of the research.

2

Findings and Discussion

2.1 Overview of findings

This section discusses the significant themes and trends that emerge from the English and Malay news sites. On the whole, the frequency of reporting on FGM for both Malay and English news sites is the highest in the years 2018 and 2019. Malay news sites report on female circumcision less compared to the English news sites, evident in the number of articles published which is less than half the number of articles published by the English news sites. Other than that, alternative news sites reported on female circumcision more compared to the mainstream news sites for both Malay and English news sites. Generally, Malay news sites seem to cover opinions supporting the practice of female circumcision more compared to English news sites. The predominant arguments represented in the English news articles oppose the practice of female circumcision. The most salient representations in the English news articles are female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis, female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, and female circumcision as a mild practice. In terms of the salient representations found in the Malay news articles, they include female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, female circumcision as a separate concept from female genital mutilation (FGM), as well as female circumcision as a practice that is devoid of religious basis.

2.2 Identification of trends in English and Malay news sites

The following section will highlight the trends identified in both the English and Malay news sites concerning female circumcision in Malaysia. The discussion of the findings includes the frequency of reporting and news articles published in English and Malay news sites, followed by the media's general stances regarding female circumcision and its practice, as well as related individuals and entities who were represented as prominent or neglected by the media. This section will then continue with a discussion on significant thematic frames surrounding the discourse of female circumcision, inclusive of the argumentation strategies used by the media to support or oppose the practice.

2.2.1 *Trends in female circumcision reports in Malay and English news sites*

An overview of the frequency of reporting in English news sites from 2016 to 2020 is illustrated in Figure 1.

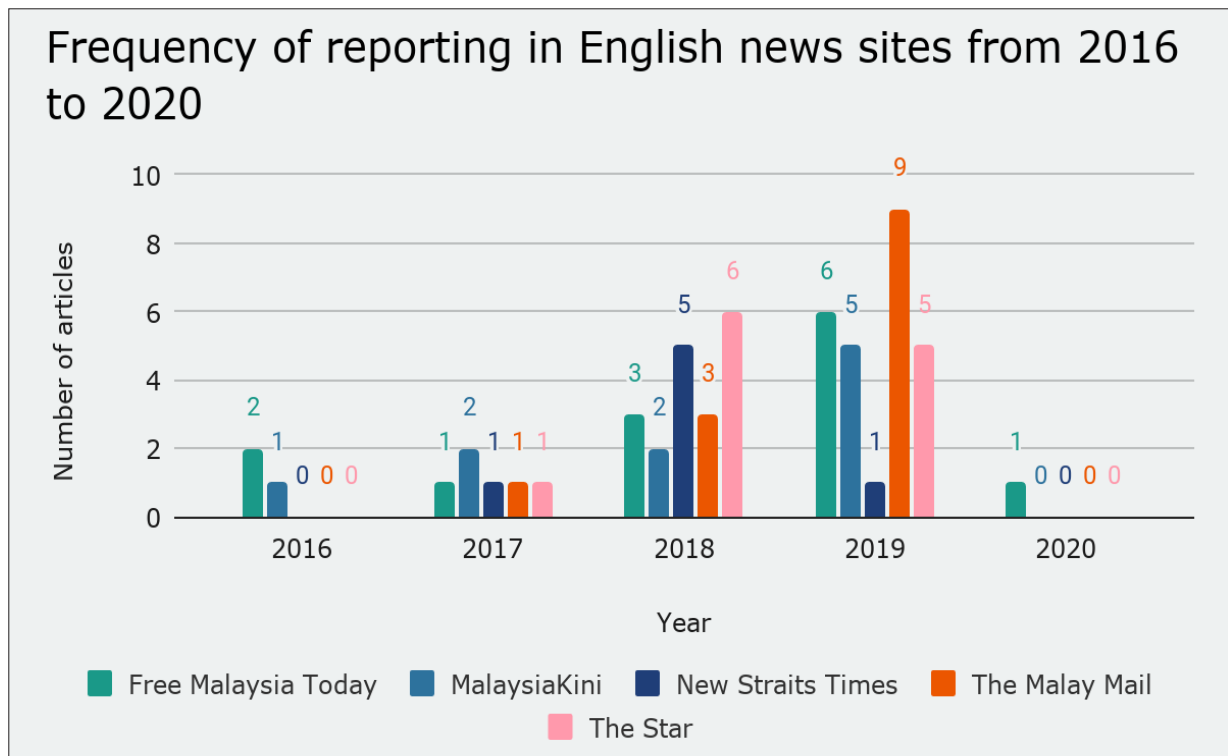


Figure 1. Frequency of reporting in English news sites from 2016 to 2020

As shown in Figure 1, the frequency of reporting was the highest in the year 2019 ($n=26$), followed by 2018 ($n=19$). *Free Malaysia Today* is the only news outlet that consistently reported on female circumcision from 2016 to 2020 with at least an article per year. Some key socio-political events between 2018 and 2019 that have undoubtedly influenced the reporting trend and triggered interest and responses are:

- The 2018 general election and change of government
- Malaysia's submission of third to fifth periodic reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- United Nations' Universal Periodic Review and Malaysia's Women, Family and Community Development Ministry's ensuing response

The total number of English news articles collected for analysis is 55. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of articles published by each English news site throughout the years from 2016 to 2020.

Free Malaysia Today and *The Malay Mail* published the highest number of articles in the five-year period, although *Free Malaysia Today* was more consistent in its reporting. *The Malay Mail* published the highest number of articles on female circumcision in 2019, but most of the articles covered female circumcision as embedded news. *New Straits Times* published the lowest number of articles in the five-year period. On looking back, the mainstream news sites seem to dominate the reporting of the practice over the years.

Figure 3 shows the sources for Malay news sites, comprising a total of 13 news sites, where it can be seen that compared to the number of English newspapers that have coverage on female circumcision in Malaysia ($n=55$), Malay newspapers have a much lower number of female circumcision-related publications ($n=20$). The greatest activity in Malay news sites in relation to female circumcision occurred in 2018 with only six publications and 2019 ($n=9$). In 2015, 2017 and 2020, only one article each was found to discuss the practice while two articles were published in 2016. Three newspapers regularly provided reports on female circumcision: *Astro Awani*, *Malaysiakini* and *Harakah Daily* with two publications each.

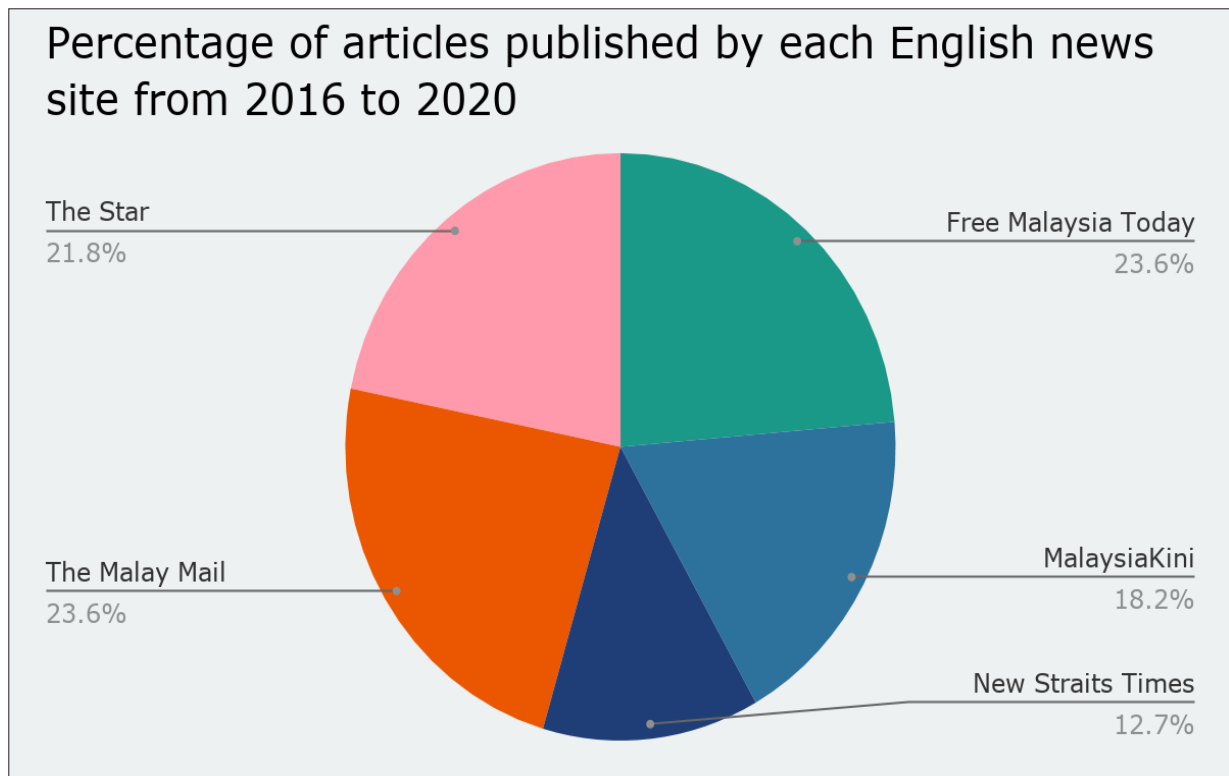


Figure 2. Percentage of articles published by each English site from 2016 to 2020

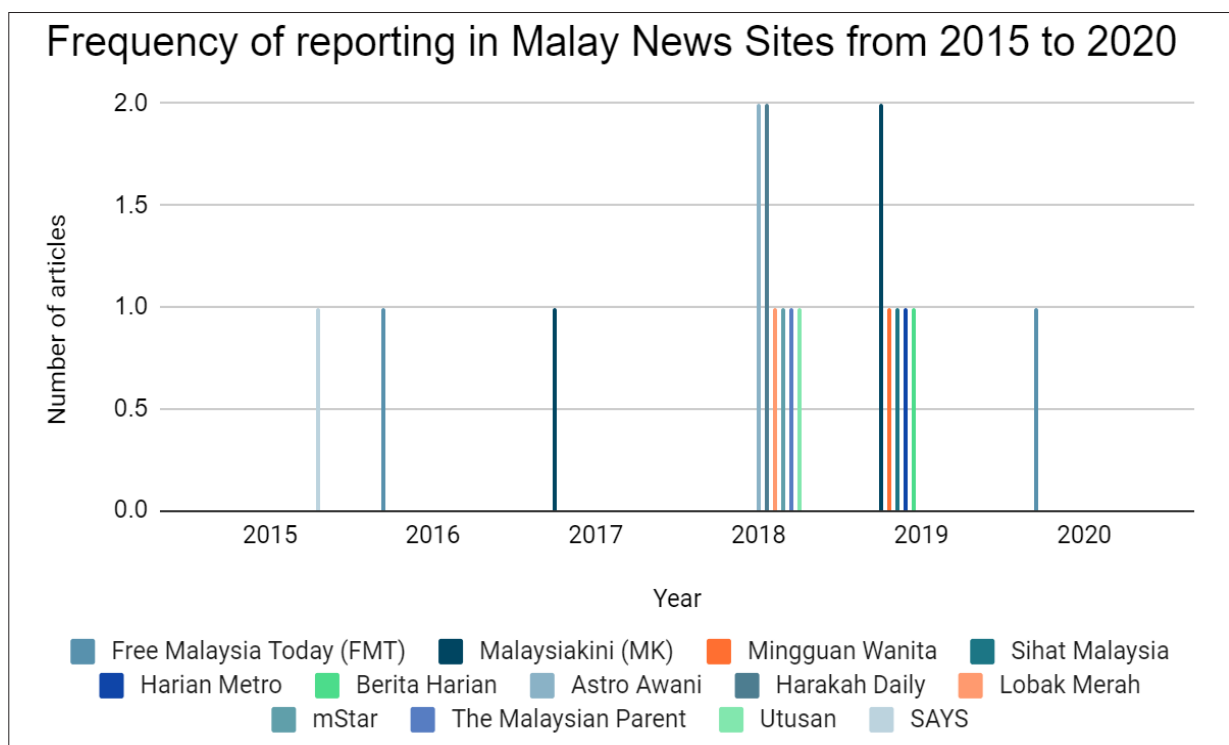


Figure 3. Frequency of reporting in Malay news sites from 2015 to 2020

Figure 4 illustrates the breakdown of articles published by Malay news sites from 2015 and 2020 by percentages. As can be seen in Figure 4, *Malaysiakini* was the most active news site publishing four articles regarding the issue of female circumcision from 2015 until 2020; this comprised 20% of

total Malay news articles found. Other Malay news sites included *Free Malaysia Today* (FMT), *Harian Metro*, *Astro Awani* and *Harakah Daily*, which comprised 10% of the overall articles published on the practice (two articles published each). The least active news sites from 2015 until 2020 were *Utusan* and *Berita Harian*, as well as other alternative news platforms such as *SAYS*, *The Malaysian Parent*, *mStar*, *Lobak Merah*, *Sihat Malaysia* and *Mingguan Wanita*.

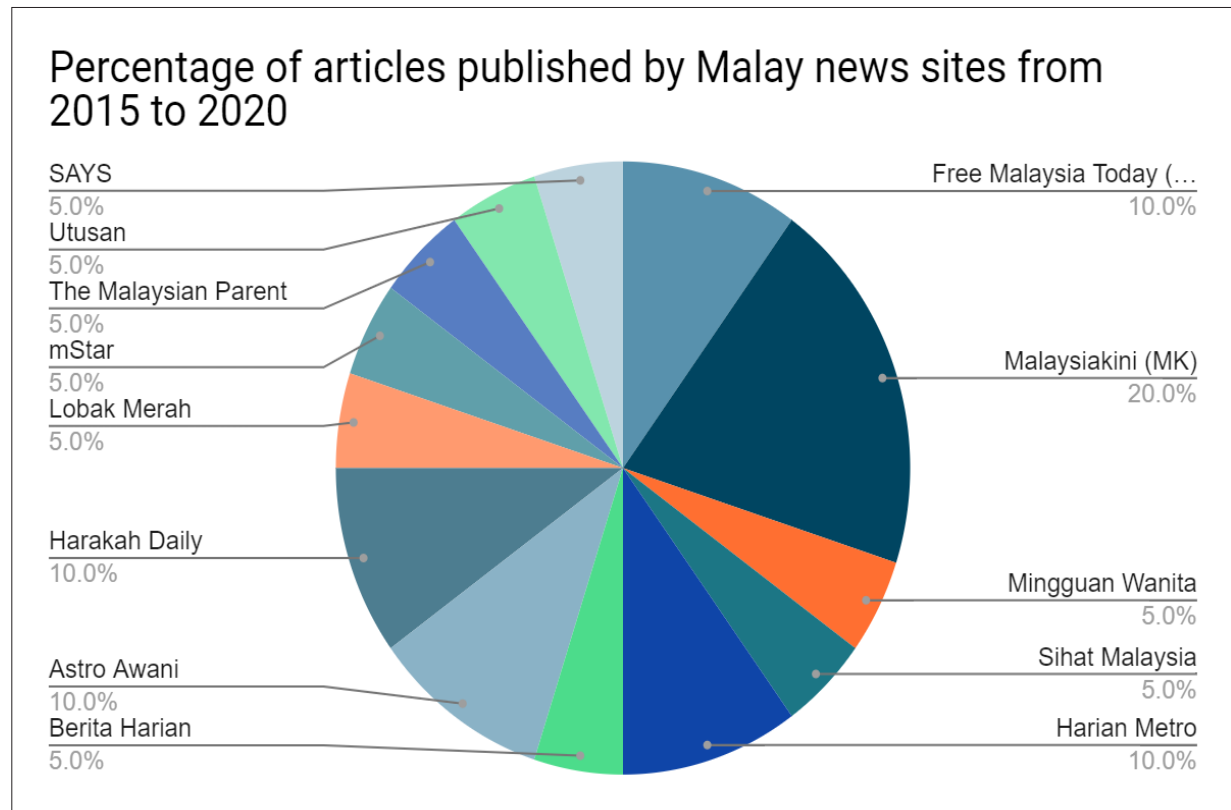


Figure 4. Percentage of articles published by each Malay site from 2015 to 2020

Similar to the increased English news publishing activity in 2018, several events may have also influenced the rise in Malay news reporting. These include the following:

- The 2018 Malaysian General Election that resulted in the change in government.
- Malaysia's submission of the combined third to fifth periodic reports to Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- The United Nations' Universal Periodic Review and Malaysia's Women, Family and Community Development Ministry's ensuing response.
- The previous Health Minister Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad's statement in November 2018 clarifying that female circumcision practice in Malaysia is dissimilar to FGM.

Figure 5 shows that throughout the five years, most of the articles feature female circumcision as embedded news ($n=20$) and assumed a more or less neutral stance ($n=19$). Neutral stance here refers to the strategy of quoting different voices without making any comments. This can be considered significant because it indicates reluctance on the part of the newspaper to take any kind of ideological stand on the issue. Throughout the five years analysed, the English news sites consistently featured stances that oppose the practice. Articles that display agreement with the practice only appeared in 2019 ($n=2$). In 2019, female circumcision was more often reported as embedded news than in other years. In 2017 and 2018, the articles mainly assumed a neutral stance.

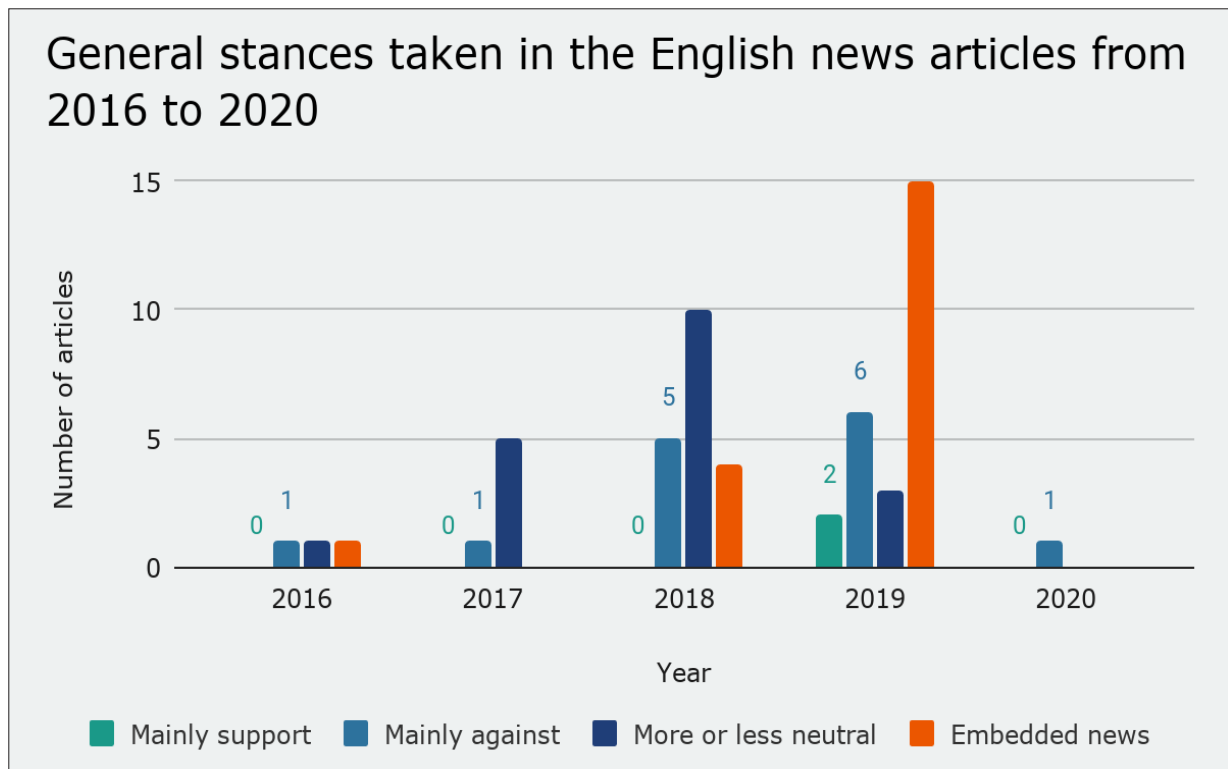


Figure 5. General stances taken in the English news articles

Similar analysis was conducted for the Malay news articles and their general stances in relation to female circumcision in Malaysia from 2015 and 2020, as shown in Figure 6. As can be seen in this Figure, there was a mixture of support ($n=9$), rejection ($n=5$) or a neutral stance ($n=5$) towards the acceptance of female circumcision in Malaysia from the Malay newspapers. Based on the analysis, there is a consistency of support for the practice among selected Malay news sites from 2015 until 2019. However, the most significant observation was seen in 2018 with six articles endorsing the practice of female circumcision. In contrast, the stance to reject the practice was only seen in 2016, 2019 and 2020. The highest number of articles opposing female circumcision only appeared in 2019 ($n=2$). Among the reasons for this trend could be the practice being strongly tied to Malay Muslim culture and associated with religious obligations, as well as the public endorsement, in 2018, by the Minister of Women, Family and Community development (Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail) of the practice of female circumcision as culturally connected to the people (“Khatan bayi perempuan di Malaysia berbeza - Dr Dzulkefly”, 2018).

2.2.2 Trends in representing social actors (trends in reporting people) across English news sites

This section illustrates an overview on the discourse patterns. Figure 7 shows the 50 most occurring words in Malaysian English news articles on female circumcision from 2016 to 2020.

Based on Figure 7, the discourse patterns were observed through the top 50 occurring words in each sub corpus. As expected, the words ‘female’, ‘circumcision’, ‘fgm’, ‘genital’, ‘mutilation’, ‘practice’, ‘cutting’, ‘genitalia’ appeared, revealing that the subcorpora represent discourses related to the practice. Words such as ‘muslim’, ‘baby’, ‘women’, ‘girls’ also appeared, highlighting the persons that are related to the practice. Other social actors that also appeared in the list are ‘committee’, ‘ministry’, ‘suhakam’, ‘wan’ (azizah), and ‘countries’. The words ‘daughter’, ‘daughters’, ‘parent’, and ‘parents’ were not in the top of the most frequent word list for all subcorpora, while the words ‘mother’

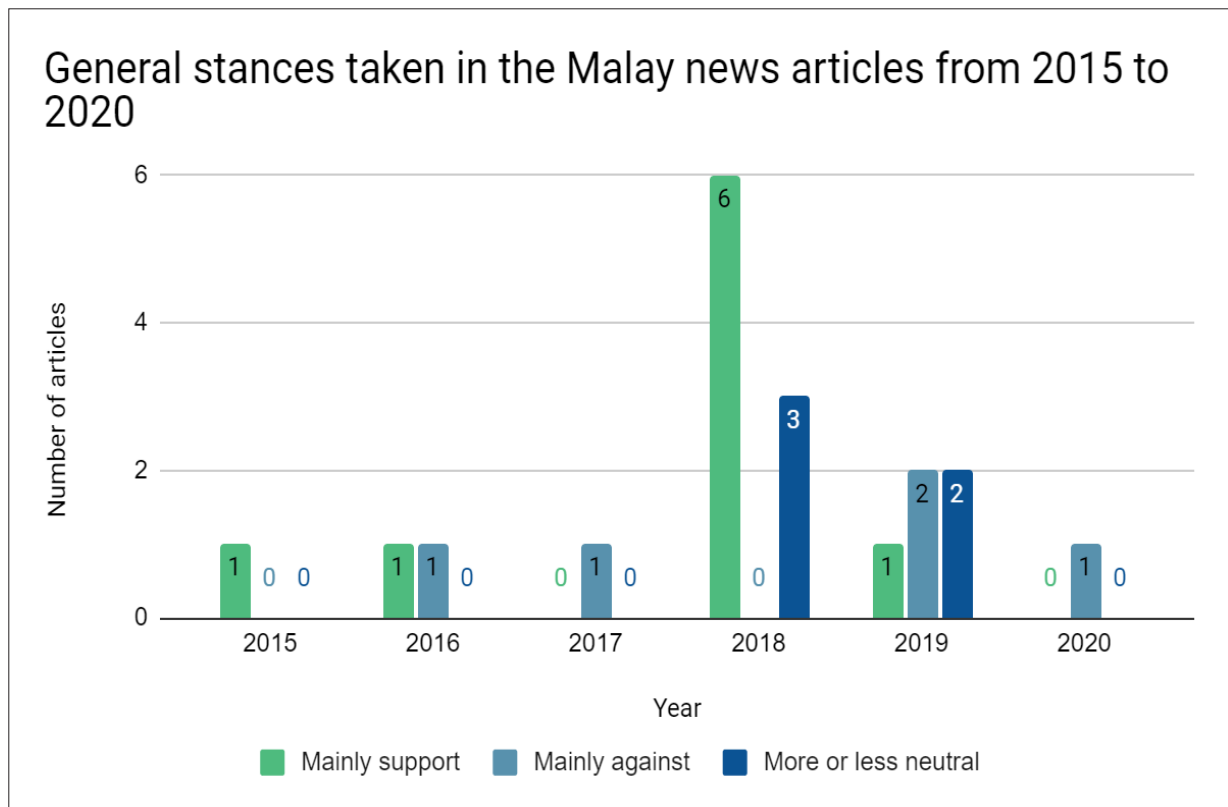


Figure 6. General stances taken in the Malay news articles



Figure 7. Fifty most frequently occurring words in English news articles on female circumcision from 2016-2020

and ‘father’ were completely absent. Besides the term ‘female circumcision’, the abbreviation ‘fgm’ was also seen to be primarily used by English mainstream and alternative news media to refer to the practice. The word ‘cutting’ seemed to be used less frequently compared to the word ‘mutilation’. The issue of female circumcision was positioned through discourses of religion, culture, health, rights, and gender as demonstrated in the reporting and overall discourse pattern. Words such as ‘health’,

'rights', 'cultural', 'religious', 'medical' and 'sexual' appeared frequently. The word 'fatwa' seems to have been used a lot, drawn as a reference in the news texts. As a religious edict that holds a potential legitimising force, this is a significant word in the media discourse. Most of the discourses have been used to both support and oppose the practice. There are emerging contradictory discourses (e.g., religion has been used to both justify and contest the practice of female circumcision). Intertextual references were drawn to several *fatwas* issued either through the National Fatwa Council on a national level or through offices of state *muftis* on the state level. One of the distinctive words that appeared from the word cloud was the word 'health' which occurred 73 times in reference to "health authorities", "health benefits" (but mostly referring to the lack thereof), "women's (and girls') health", "health circular", "health complications", "health interventions", "health issue(s)", "health perspective", "health professionals" and "health workers" as seen in the concordances of the word. The word "health" was predominantly used in reference to the names of health authorities such as the "Ministry of Health" or "Health Ministry", and the "World Health Organization". The health discourse of the English news media was also imbued with a sense of ethics and morality, including calls to action that were made to directly address health practitioners in Malaysia, urging them to abandon the practice and protect the rights of young girls. The alleged health benefits, or the lack thereof, were discussed in the media discourse. The 'cultural' aspect seemed to have been foregrounded too, significantly by government-related authorities including the former deputy prime minister. Presence of nominated social actors such 'cedaw' and 'suhakam' accentuated the discourses of human rights. Words such as 'international', 'human', 'rights', 'harmful', and 'discrimination' also highlighted this. Even through the frequency of words, certain ideologies are already unveiled, indicating that there is a form of control over discourses within the media texts analysed.

Table 2 shows the persons and entities that appeared most frequently in the English news articles. The rank indicates the rank of most occurring words in the corpus. The frequency indicates the occurrence of words in the corpus. The persons and entities are classified into five categories as presented in Table 2.

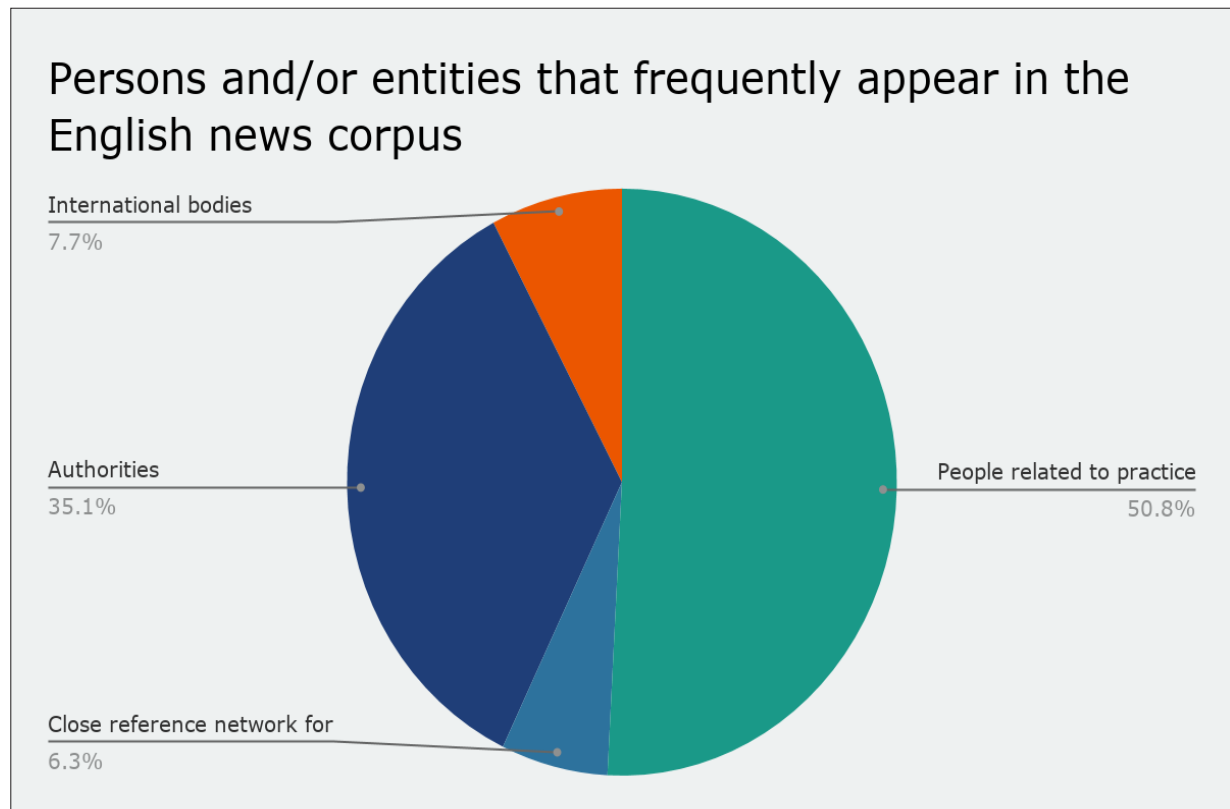
Table 2. List of persons and entities frequently appearing in the English news articles

| Rank | Frequency | Word | Category |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|--|
| 16/139 | 156/20 | women, woman | People related to the practice |
| 32/149 | 78/18 | girls, girl | |
| 36/87 | 76/29 | muslim, muslims | |
| 84 | 30 | child | |
| 161 | 17 | baby | |
| 183/193 | 15/14 | infants, infant | Close reference network for people related to the practice |
| 86 | 29 | community | |
| 91 | 27 | family | |
| 46 | 55 | committee | Authorities |
| 49 | 54 | ministry | |
| 62 | 39 | al* | |
| 89 | 28 | government | |
| 96 | 27 | wan | |

Table 2. *List of persons and entities frequently appearing in the English news articles (continued)*

| Rank | Frequency | Word | Category |
|------|-----------|----------------|----------------------|
| 103 | 25 | dr | |
| 109 | 25 | suhakam | |
| 122 | 21 | azizah | |
| 167 | 17 | representative | |
| 175 | 16 | minister | |
| 177 | 16 | putrajaya | |
| 179 | 15 | council | |
| 198 | 14 | scholars | |
| 52 | 52 | who* | International bodies |
| 71 | 35 | cedaw | |
| 95 | 27 | un* | |

The social actors in the discourse can be categorised specifically as people related to the practice, close reference network for people related to the practice, authorities, and international bodies. Figure 8 illustrates the percentage of appearance of persons and entities in the English news sites.

**Figure 8.** Persons and/or entities that frequently appear in the English news corpus

The highest percentage of appearance of persons and/or entities was 'People related to the practice', followed by 'Authorities'. Based on the preliminary corpus-assisted analysis, the voices that were given prominence were revealed. A closer look at the texts shows that voices of the grassroots were not emphasised. Women and girls, the social actors who were mostly categorised as the 'People related to the practice' were often passivated, and agency was typically given to authorities instead. Though the people related to the practice were mentioned more frequently, they did not appear to have much agency and were more often categorized according to their shared identities and functions.

In contrast, the social actors who were under the category of 'Authorities' had greater agency, often represented as the active force that drives an activity. The roles of ministries are activated as the social actors that make "claims", "announcements", "declarations", "assurance", "defenses", "denials", "endorsements", "reports", "provisions" and "specifications" as seen in the concordances of the use of the word "ministry" in the English news media dataset. The same applies for the word "committee", where the social actors were represented taking active roles of "adopting a resolution", voicing out critiques, putting "emphasis" and "stresses" on issues, making "decisions", "urging" people or institutions to act, providing "reports", issuing "rulings", and making "statements". Reference to the 'Authorities' is significant because the term itself connotes power, and therefore, any statement ascribed to them has the force of legitimization behind it, which must be listened to by others. The 'Authorities' comprised several authorities:

- Government authorities such as ministers (e.g., Women, Family and Community Development Minister, and Deputy Prime Minister) and ministries (e.g., Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, and Health Ministry).
- Religious authorities such as the National Fatwa Committee, Perlis Fatwa Committee, National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs, local and international religious scholars and institutions (e.g., Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri, Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Al-Azhar University, and Dar Al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah, the Egyptian centre of Islamic legal research).
- International authorities such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) committee and Human Rights Council.
- Medical authorities such as the Health Ministry/Ministry of Health, doctors.

Additionally, some social actors that hold a certain authority were often nominated and functionalised. One that particularly stands out is Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail who was always mentioned alongside references to her ministerial position and her qualification as a medical doctor. Another institution under the category of 'Authority', SUHAKAM, was listed in the 50 most occurring words, but corpus evidence revealed that it predominantly appeared in 2018 with only one other occurrence in one of the 2019 texts. It was represented as being reactive towards the government, playing an active role in criticising the government in 2018 over their stance on the practice (e.g., "has slammed", "issued a scathing statement criticising...", "lambasted", "criticised") at the Universal Periodic Review. It must be noted that SUHAKAM did not express a clear stance on female circumcision, largely making reactionary comments only when the issue was particularly prominent despite its role as the premier advisory body on human rights issues in Malaysia.

As for the religious authorities, it is interesting to note that only a few state *fatwa* committees were represented in the reporting, namely Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Perlis, and Johor. There appeared to be different state juristic opinions on the practice of female circumcision; the *fatwa* committee of Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur stated that the practice is compulsory while the *fatwa* committee of Perlis stated that the practice is generally unnecessary unless a need arises, and the *fatwa* committee of Johor stated that the practice is permissible. Other state *fatwa* committees were seemingly silent on the practice with no state rulings made clear to the public. The word "fatwa" itself was mostly used to refer to *fatwa* committees or councils and when used

to refer to a *fatwa* directly, most often referred to the national *fatwa* issued by the Department of Islamic Development in 2009.

2.2.3 Trends in representing social actors (trends in reporting people) across Malay news sites

Figure 9 shows the top 50 most frequently occurring words in the Malay news articles on female circumcision from 2015 to 2020. The words '*perempuan*', '*amalan*', '*khitan*', '*bayi*', '(*Orang*) Islam', '*kesihatan*' and '*berkhitan*' revealed the main discourses in the Malay news articles. Other words indicated the specific persons involved in the practice of female circumcision such as '*bayi*', '*perempuan*', and '*wanita*'. In contrast to the English data, there were mentions of '*ibu*' and '*kanak-kanak*', which can be seen in the overall top 50 mentioned words in the selected Malay news articles. Furthermore, '*kementerian*', '*ulama*', '*doktor*', and '*masyarakat*' also emerged in the corpus as social decision-making entities of the practice contributing to the discussion of female circumcision in Malaysia. 'FGM' was referred to quite consistently in the data, while the words '*khitan*' and '*berkhitan*' proved popular in discussions about the practice in the Malay media. However, the alternative word '*memotong*', which is synonymous with the English word 'cutting', appeared least frequently. Overall, according to the Malay newspaper media, the discussion of female circumcision as practiced in Malaysia is centred around the topic of health (the benefits and risks), women's rights (to willingly practice female circumcision and freedom to refuse), religion (Islamic obligations) and culture.



Figure 9. Fifty most frequently occurring words in Malay news articles on female circumcision from 2015-2020

Table 3 summarises the breakdown of individuals and specific entities that appeared frequently in the Malay corpus. There were four main categories found in the Malay corpus, including people related to the practice, close reference networks for people related to the practice, authorities and international bodies.

Table 3. List of persons and entities frequently appearing in the Malay news articles

| Rank | Frequency | Word | Category |
|--------|-----------|----------------------|--|
| 3 | 205 | perempuan | People related to the practice |
| 11 | 83 | bayi | |
| 13 | 79 | wanita | |
| 29 | 47 | anak | |
| 51 | 30 | kanak | |
| 48/17 | 32/72 | orang islam | Close reference network for people related to the practice |
| 87 | 18 | masyarakat | |
| 97 | 17 | ibu | |
| 31 | 47 | dr | Authorities |
| 62 | 25 | kementerian | |
| 79 | 21 | ulama | |
| 205 | 9 | wan | |
| 248 | 7 | azizah | |
| 95 | 17 | doktor | |
| 100 | 17 | pakar | |
| 122 | 14 | bidan | |
| 151 | 11 | kerajaan | |
| 163 | 10 | majlis | |
| 178 | 9 | jawatankuasa | |
| 194 | 9 | pengamal (perubatan) | |
| 282 | 7 | suhakam | |
| 91/126 | 18/14 | who*/pbb* | International bodies |
| 1051 | 2 | unicef* | |

“Who” is marked with an asterisk as it refers to the World Health Organization (WHO), as is “pbb” which is understood as “Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu” (PBB). “Unicef” refers to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). It is interesting to note that although people who were directly related to the practice of female circumcision were mentioned most frequently, they were often passivated as being the recipients who either benefitted from or were afflicted by the practice. There was no direct reference to any particular member of the community who underwent female circumcision anywhere in the Malay data. Conversely, *perempuan*, *wanita* and others in the group were broadly mentioned without being granted any specific identity.

This contrasts with the other social actors that were identified in the Malay data. The “close reference network for people related to the practice” such as *masyarakat* and *ibu* (*bapa*) were not presented as identifiable individuals, but were shown to play a powerful active role by influencing how the practice is implemented towards their children (the recipients). The following examples indicate the power parents have in deciding to follow through with the practice: “*Untuk ibu bapa yang bercadang membawa anak perempuan bersunat dapatkan nasihat doktor terlebih dulu terutama berkaitan kesesuaian umur dan keadaan kesihatan semasanya...*” (Harian Metro, January 1, 2019) and “*Bagi ibu bapa yang baru saja memperoleh cahaya mata perempuan pasti persoalan berkenaan berkhitan bermain dalam fikiran mereka. Antara yang sering diutarakan adalah usia sesuai berkhitan,*

bagaimana proses ini dilakukan, penyembuhan dan tidakkah ia menyakitkan bayi?” (Harian Metro, January 1, 2019).

Another category of social actors, namely “authorities”, are depicted as entities that hold an impactful role in legitimising or delegitimising the practice on constitutional, religious and medical levels. These social actors are divided according to the following groups:

- Government authorities (*kerajaan*) that primarily consists of two ministries, the *Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia*, as well as the *Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat*, and its ministers (e.g., Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad). Initially, the government held a protective stance in relation to FGM as practised in Malaysia by resorting to the authority of tradition, describing the practice as “*amalan budaya Malaysia*” (Quoted by Dr Wan Azizah in *Bernama* (2018), thus positioning FGM as an acceptable social practice. However, after receiving a lot of criticism from SUHAKAM, the government resorted to a more neutral stance by demonstrating a willingness to engage with expert authorities on identifying both the benefits and risks of FGM, for example, “*Timbalan Perdana Menteri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail berkata kritikan terhadap amalan berkhitan di kalangan bayi perempuan di negara ini sedang dibincangkan dengan Kementerian Kesihatan*” (Malaysiakini, November 14, 2018). This change in stance was necessary to balance the need to be seen to take action about this sensitive issue, while also portraying the government as caring and attentive. Nonetheless, the government maintained a firm position that it is an institution that cannot be pressured or swayed by other parties regarding any decisions about the practice of FGM: “*Dr Dzulkefly berkata kerajaan tidak akan bertindak kerana tekanan sama ada dari dalam atau luar negara, sebaliknya akan mengambil kira kepentingan semua pihak yang terlibat supaya isu itu dapat ditangani dengan baik*” (Astro Awani, November 14, 2018). This statement emphasises the government’s position as the central body regulating changes in practice.
- Religious authorities that include *Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia*, *Jawatankuasa Negeri Perlis*, *Jawatankuasa Negeri Johor*, and Islamic scholars, Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Dr Arieff Osman, Prof. Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradhwani.
- Medical authorities, for example, the Ministry of Health Malaysia and its minister Dr Dzulkefly, and individuals carrying out the medical procedures: *doktor/pakar doktor, bidan, pengamal perubatan*
- Non-organisation authorities such as SUHAKAM appeared specifically in 2018 Malay news sites (similarly to the English news media) to outwardly criticise the Malaysian government, particularly the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development administered by Dr. Wan Azizah, for representing FGM as a “*tanggungjawab budaya*” in Malaysia during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). However, similar to what was found in the English data, the stance taken by SUHAKAM towards the practice as depicted in the Malay data is unclear. Nonetheless, a few examples such as “*Berhubung kenyataan Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia (Suhakam) bahawa amalan khitan bayi perempuan sebagai pencabulan terhadap hak wanita*” (Astro Awani, November 18, 2018) and “*Pengerusnya (SUHAKAM), Tan Sri Razali Ismail dalam satu kenyataan berkata, pembentangan yang mengelirukan itu hanya akan menjejaskan imej Malaysia di peringkat antarabangsa*” (Malaysiakini, November 14, 2018) may suggest that SUHAKAM is of the opinion that FGM is a practice that violates human rights and could diminish the country’s reputation worldwide.

Beginning in 2018, international bodies such as WHO and UNICEF received growing attention from the Malay news media particularly for their persistent entreaties to Malaysia and other countries to eliminate the practice of FGM. The agency and active roles of these organisations were amplified through forceful words (e.g., *menggesa, amalan sunat merupakan pencabulan hak remaja dan wanita, etc.*) that highlight their dominant status as protectors and spokespersons of human rights,

and as organisations that could pressure the Malaysian government to take action. Furthermore, WHO was also represented as an identifiable individual through direct references to Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who was mentioned in several instances in the Malay news media for upholding her disapproval of the practice of FGM on behalf of WHO (*Bachelet masih tetap pendirian terhadap kritikan amalan mutilasi alat kelamin wanita (FGM)*). By associating Bachelet with WHO, the media represents her as a powerful social actor able, on behalf of the organisation, to negotiate the matter at hand with the Malaysian government. As an illustration, *“Kami (PBB) tidak berbincang berkenaan tempoh masa untuk pengharaman FGM”; “Kami bercakap berkenaan isu ini dan cari jalan kerana memahami setiap komuniti mempunyai cara dan budaya berbeza berkenaan perkara tersebut,” katanya (Bachelet)”* (Malaysiakini, October 5, 2019).

Figure 10 demonstrates the persons and entities that frequently appeared in the Malay news corpus from 2015 until 2020. It was found that people related to the practice of female circumcision (i.e., *perempuan, bayi, wanita, orang Islam, kanak-kanak*) appeared the most frequently (65.4%) in the Malay corpus. This was followed by the authorities (i.e., *dr, kementerian, ulama, kerajaan*), who comprised 24.1% of the total number of persons and entities identified in the data. Close reference networks for people related to the practice such as *masyarakat, ibu* and *bapa* constituted 6.4%. The least-frequently mentioned entities in the Malay corpus were associated with international bodies such as the WHO and UNICEF (4%).

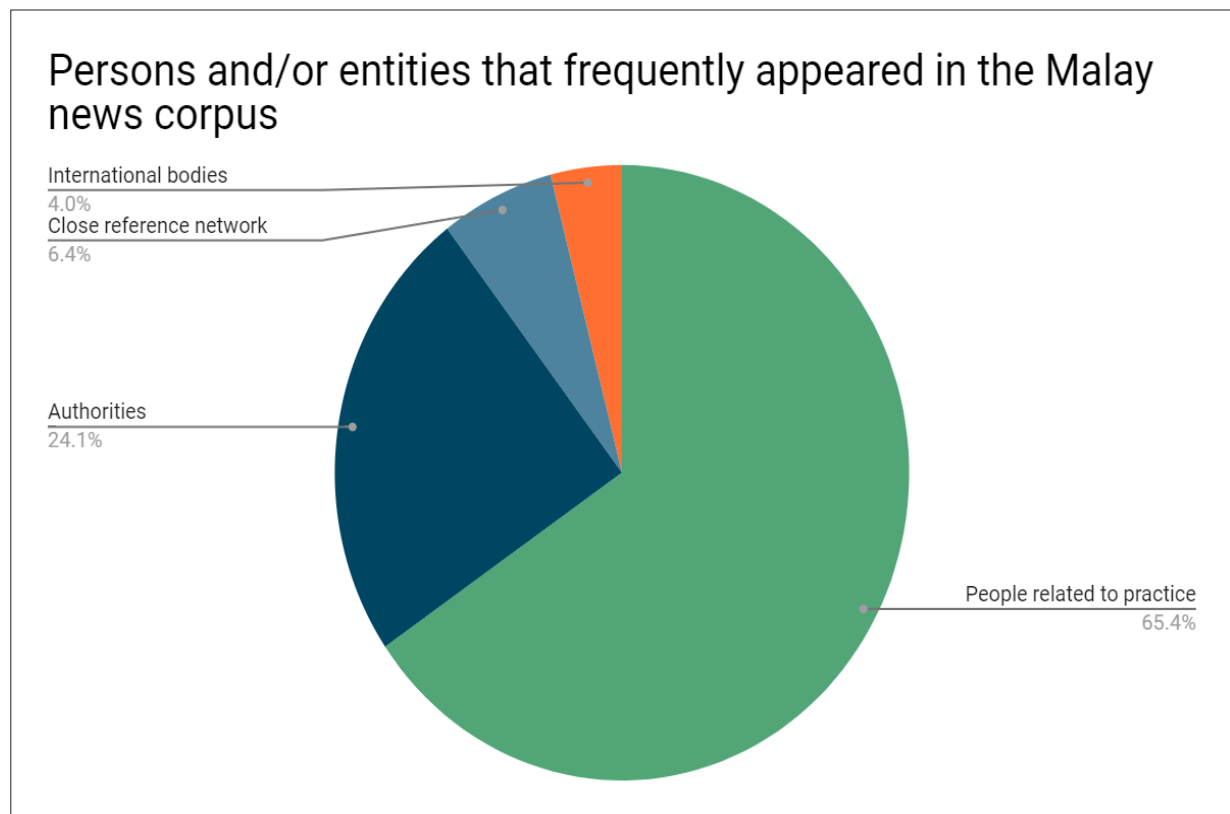


Figure 10. Persons and/or entities that frequently appear in the Malay news corpus

2.3 Significant frames across English and Malay news sites

The following frames were derived from the keyword analysis, frame analysis and coding of both the English and Malay data. The report will broadly focus on these five salient thematic frames:

- 1) Culture and tradition
- 2) Human rights

- 3) Religion
- 4) Health
- 5) Gender

2.3.1 Coverage of thematic frames in English news sites

Figure 11 depicts the coverage of thematic frames in English news sites according to year. Based on 2018 and 2019 trends, female circumcision seems to be positioned more through discourses of human rights compared to other discourses (i.e., discourse of culture and tradition; discourse of religion; discourse of health; and discourse of gender). However, in 2019, discourses of religion and health predominated over discourses of culture and gender. In 2019, female circumcision was more often reported as embedded news, meaning that it was included in the larger discourse of women's rights. In discussing women's right issues, the discourse of health was used to justify the contestation of female circumcision. Discourses of religion have been used to both justify and oppose the practice, but it was mainly used to challenge the legitimacy of the practice (see 2.3.3).

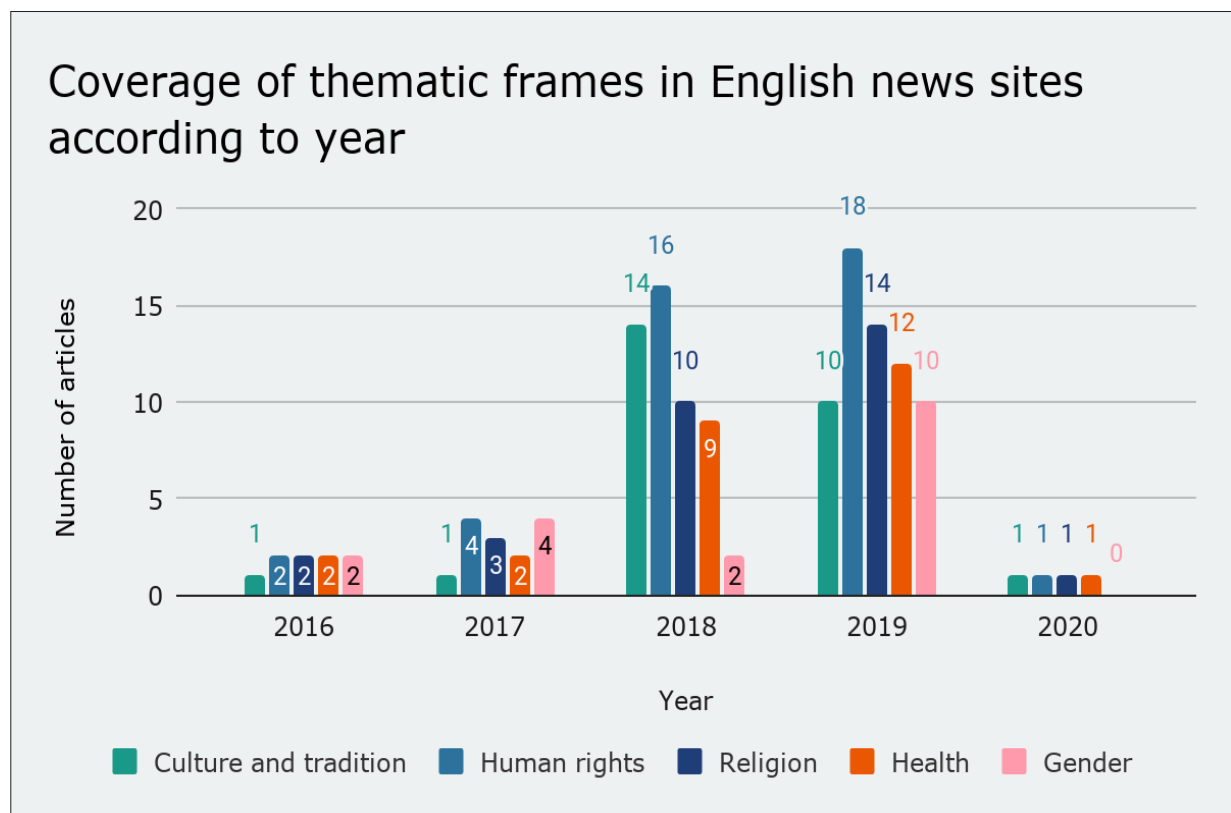


Figure 11. Coverage of thematic frames in English news sites

2.3.2 Coverage of thematic frames in Malay news sites

In 2015, there was prevalent coverage on all five discourse topics related to female circumcision in the Malay data. However, certain issues were further highlighted in 2016 by several Malay news sites, particularly in areas of culture and tradition, religion and health. References to events that occurred in Egypt and Indonesia in conjunction with the implementation of their anti-FGM policies did not change the overall stance of several Malaysian stakeholders that supported or remained neutral towards the practice of female circumcision. There was acknowledgement concerning the bans, yet this was contradicted with ambivalent statements from medical experts such as:

... (dia) ... bagaimanapun mengakui prosedur FGM di Malaysia tidak membuang terlalu banyak lebihan kulit pada kemaluan perempuan, seperti amalan budaya dan tempat lain. “Tetapi sebaik-baiknya, ia tidak perlu dibuat,” katanya. (Free Malaysia Today, October 17, 2016).

This statement, which was published in *Free Malaysia Today*, is ambiguous as it makes two seemingly contradictory points: (1) female circumcision as a practice is considered mild, and (2) it is best not to carry out the practice. The statement is contradictory because it implies that female circumcision is an acceptable practice but at the same time, denies or warns against practicing it. In the following year, 2017, two key discourses were found to exclusively mention discourses of religion and health. In comparison to data from the English news sites (see Figure 12), there was a more significant tendency in the Malay news sites for female circumcision to be discussed in the areas of ‘culture and tradition’ as well as ‘health’ over the other discourses such as human rights, religion and gender. The discourse of gender remained the least discussed, compared to other discourses throughout all the Malay news reports identified between 2015 and 2019, and was absent in 2020.

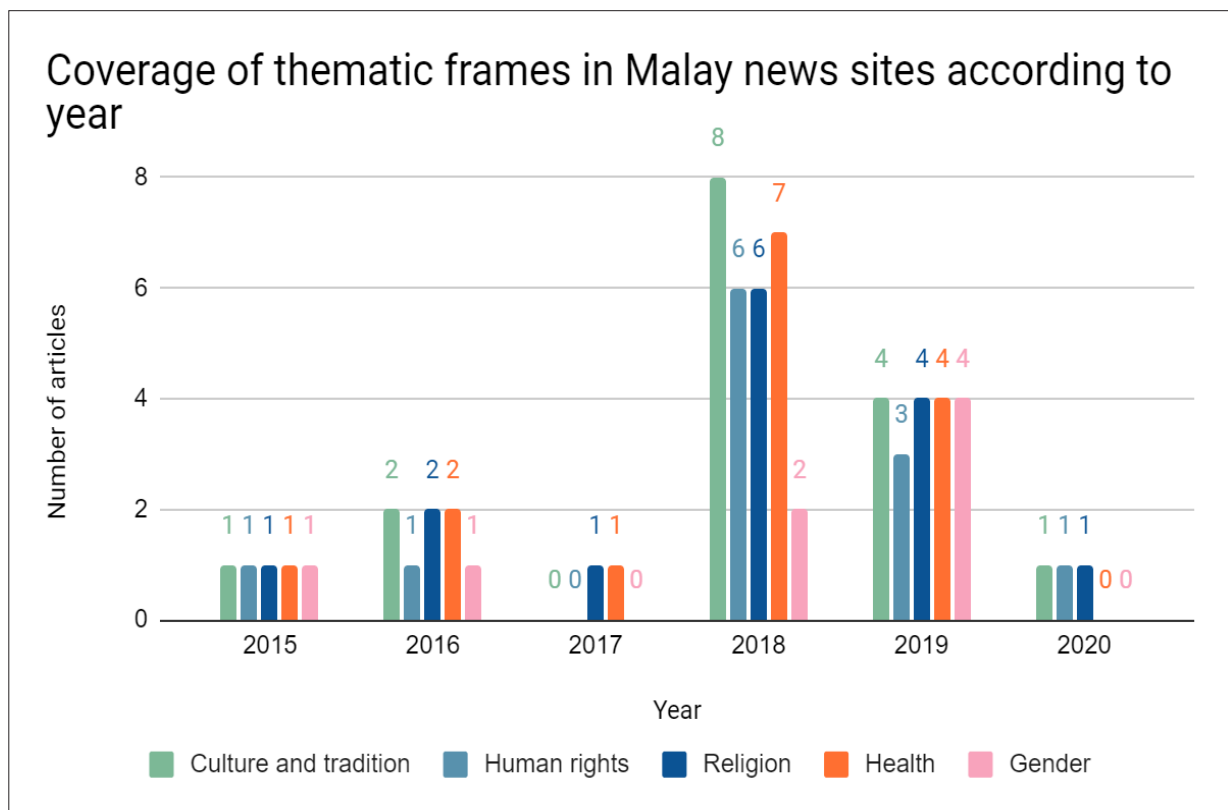


Figure 12. Coverage of thematic frames in Malay news sites

The following are the sub-themes for each thematic frame found in both English and Malay news sites across the years:

Thematic Frame 1: Culture and tradition

- Female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition
- Female circumcision as a socially expected practice
- Female circumcision as an outdated cultural practice and tradition

Thematic Frame 2: Human rights

- Female circumcision as a form of violation of human rights
- Female circumcision as a separate concept from Female Genital Mutilation
- Female circumcision as a harmful practice
- Female circumcision as a form of violence against women
- Female circumcision as a woman's right

Thematic Frame 3: Religion

- Female circumcision as a religious obligation
- Female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis
- Female circumcision as an encouraged practice
- Female circumcision as a politicised religious issue
- Female circumcision as a permissible practice

Thematic Frame 4: Health

- Female circumcision as a mild or harmless practice
- Female circumcision as a practice devoid of health benefits
- Female circumcision as a risky practice
- Female circumcision as a medicalised practice
- Female circumcision as a practice devoid of clear guidelines

Thematic Frame 5: Gender

- Female circumcision as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice
- Female circumcision as a way of lowering sex drive and controlling sexual urges
- Female circumcision as an honourable act
- Female circumcision as a covert affair and a taboo topic
- Female circumcision as a way of preventing 'wildness'
- Female circumcision as a practice akin to male circumcision
- Female circumcision as suppressing women's natural bodies

The sub-themes for each thematic frame are discussed in detail in 2.3.3 and 2.3.4, with attention to the more prominent sub-themes. The arguments presented in the news articles are incorporated together as an analysis.

2.3.3 Argumentative strategies used to represent female circumcision in English news sites

The thematic frames and the sub-themes are further classified into arguments supporting female circumcision and arguments against female circumcision. Table 4 presents the categorisation of arguments found in the English news sites:

Figure 13 shows the coverage of thematic frames in each English news site. The most prominent thematic frame for all of the English news sites is 'Human rights', except for *Free Malaysia Today* in which the most prominent thematic frames are 'Culture and tradition', 'Religion', and 'Health'. The least prominent thematic frame for all of the English news sites is 'Gender', except for *MalaysiaKini* in which 'Gender' is the second least prominent frame after 'Human rights'. In terms of the arguments, the most prominent in the English news articles were the absence of religious basis for the practice, cultural reasons, and mildness of the practice.

Table 4. *List of arguments found in the English news sites*

| Arguments supporting female circumcision | Thematic frames | Arguments against female circumcision |
|---|------------------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition | Culture and tradition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition |
| - | Human rights | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a form of violation of human rights Female circumcision as a harmful practice Female circumcision as a form of violence against women |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a religious obligation Female circumcision as an encouraged practice Female circumcision as a politicised religious issue Female circumcision as a permissible practice | Religion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a practice with no complications Female circumcision as a hygienic and/or medically beneficial practice Female circumcision as a mild or harmless practice | Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a practice devoid of health benefits Female circumcision as a risky practice Female circumcision as a medicalised practice Female circumcision as a practice devoid of clear guidelines |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a way of lowering sex drive and controlling sexual urges Female circumcision as an honourable act Female circumcision as a way of preventing 'wildness' Female circumcision as a practice akin to male circumcision | Gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice Female circumcision as a covert affair and a taboo topic |

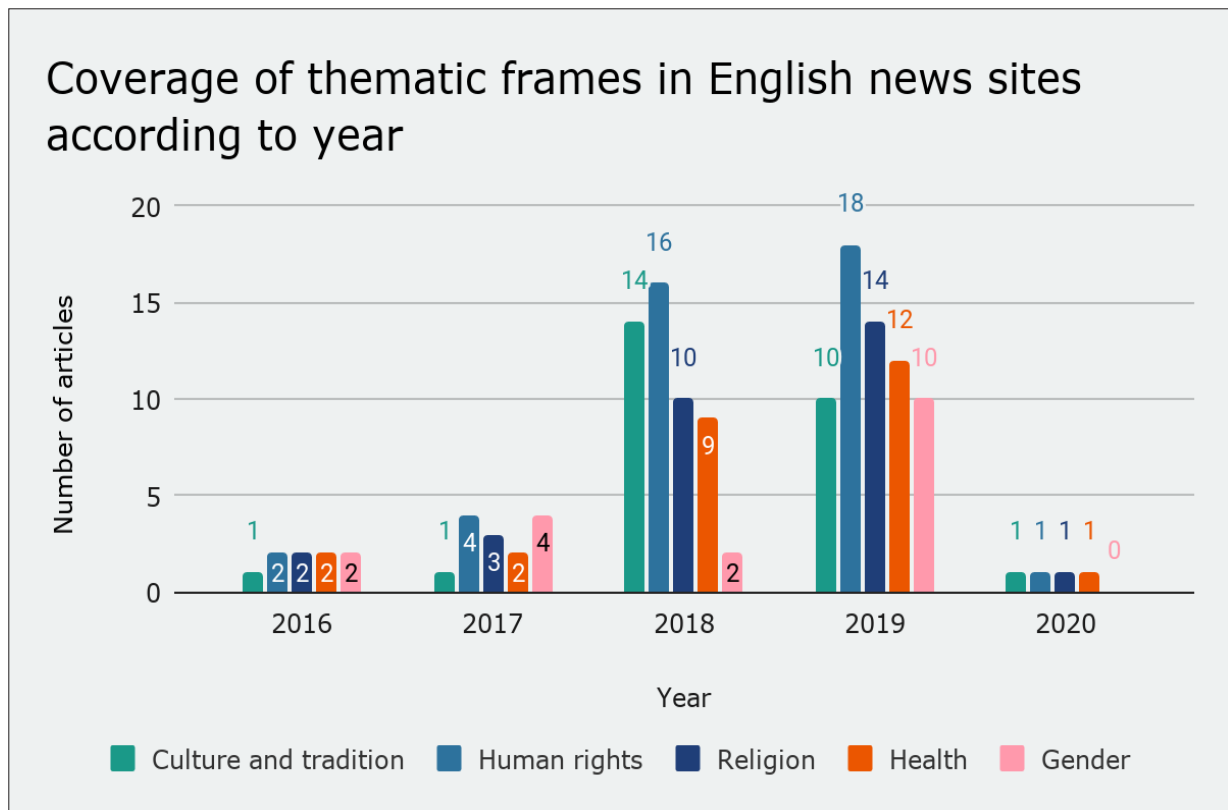


Figure 13. Coverage of thematic frames in English news sites according to year

The findings showed multiple frames adopted by Malaysian English mainstream and alternative news sites to represent the practice of female circumcision. From the religious perspective, there were three salient discourse representations: female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis, as a religious obligation, and as an encouraged practice. From the cultural perspective, the practice was represented as a cultural obligation, and as a tradition. From the health and scientific perspective, there were also three different representations. First, female circumcision was represented as a risky practice devoid of health benefits. Next, one interesting perspective looks at the representation of female circumcision as a medicalised practice. It was also represented as a mild practice, as a practice with minimal risk, and as a practice with no complications. From the human rights lens, the representations identified were female circumcision as a harmful practice, as a form of violence against women, and as a form of violation of human rights. The last frame displayed an overarching representation of female circumcision as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice. In addition, it was also specifically represented as a way of lowering sex drive, a way of preventing 'wildness', an honourable act, and a taboo topic. The excerpts cited focus on the more dominant frames in the articles.

Religion: Female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis

Female circumcision was largely represented as a practice that was devoid of religious basis. An argumentative strategy that was widely employed to portray the practice as having no religious basis was to demonstrate the lack of evidence for it. Excerpts 1 and 2 argue that there are no mentions of or references to female circumcision in the Quran.

Excerpt 1

“There is no verse in the Quran which promotes female circumcision. Even University Al-Azhar – Sunni Islam’s most prestigious institution and the centre of Islamic learning which studies the Quran and Islamic law in detail, outlawed the practice of female circumcision in 2007.” (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)

Excerpt 1 shows the strategy of using an expert authority (University Al-Azhar) to argue against the practice, further explaining that Al-Azhar is “Sunni Islam’s most prestigious institution and the centre of Islamic learning which studies the Quran and Islamic law in detail”, thus emphasising the weight of the authority.

Excerpt 2 is taken from *Free Malaysia Today* as well, but it was published in 2019. This excerpt demonstrates an intertextual reference to a religious edict issued in 2009, ten years prior to the article’s publication. This intertextual reference is important because a religious edict, or a *fatwa*, issued by the National Fatwa Council is viewed as a legitimately institutionalised religious opinion in Malaysia. The strategy that is used to argue against the practice through the frame mentioned is scientific rationalisation, citing knowledge that the reference used by the council is from a *mazhab* or school of thought, ‘mazhab (Maliki)’, an Islamic school of thought that is not subscribed to by the majority of Malaysian Muslims.

Excerpt 2

*“The National Fatwa Council in 2009 made the practice obligatory (wajib) for girls (<http://e-smaf.islam.gov.my/e-smaf/fatwa/fatwa/find/pr/15253>). Yet, **their rationale couldn’t even find the necessary references in the Quran and had to utilise arguments from a different mazhab (Maliki).**”* (Free Malaysia Today, 27 January 2019)

Excerpt 3 demonstrates the public perception that the *fatwa* has a certain authority in Malaysia. This form of authority is one of the argumentation strategies employed to justify a practice: the strategy of impersonal authority. This authority is manifested through the use of cognate adjectives such as “mandatory” as seen in Excerpt 3. The excerpt pleads the case against the practice through moral evaluation strategy. Moral evaluation strategy is sometimes not realised explicitly when it is connected to certain discourses of moral value. It has been argued that there are no specific linguistic realisations that can identify the moral concepts behind the argument. Thus, the notion of interdiscursivity and the approach of historical discourse can help to unveil the moral discourses that underpin the moral evaluation. In this case, the author is making an argument for the larger discourse that supports the eradication of the practice as advocated by international bodies such as the United Nations and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), through the inclusion of General Recommendation No. 14, made by the committee in 1990 to eradicate the practice, and the integration of this recommendation under the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, Goal 5 (gender equality).

Excerpt 3

*"A stumbling block to its eradication here, it said, was the understanding of many Muslims on female circumcision who believe that it is "wajib" (mandatory) and part of culture. "What is more concerning is the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (Jakim) 2009 fatwa stating that female circumcision (FC) is mandatory. **"Even though this fatwa was not gazetted, the reality is that in general, fatwas have a strong influence over individuals and communities in their personal decision-making,"** it said."* (Free Malaysia Today, 6 February 2020)

Other than that, an argument of law was also used to indirectly argue against the practice as seen in Excerpt 4 from *The Malay Mail*. This excerpt is a recontextualization of the Perlis fatwa committee decision, citing an official Facebook post by the *mufti*, or religious leader, of Perlis. *Shariah*, or Islamic law, can be interpreted using different schools of thought and Malaysia, like other Southeast Asian countries, follows the *Shafi'i* school of thought though it is not directly mentioned in this excerpt. The argument stated that carrying out the practice by "certain parts of the society without reviewing its necessity with experts" was not supported by Islamic law; the argument emphasised the possibility of risk, through the mention of exposure to harm if not correctly done. The phrase "if done incorrectly" presupposed the existence of a 'correct' way of performing female circumcision. However, the context of the actual Facebook post, and the article's internal context, revealed that there was a possible condition in which the medical necessity arose for some women to go through the procedure. Thus, unless deemed necessary by experts, it could be implied that the practice was not a religious obligation.

Excerpt 4

*"Female circumcision that is done by certain parts of the society without reviewing its necessity with experts is **a practise that has no basis in Shariah**, furthermore it may expose infants to harm if done incorrectly," said the committee's decision, as announced by Asri on his official Facebook page."* (The Malay Mail, 8 June 2017)

Excerpt 5 demonstrates an argument that negates the religious basis behind the practice on the ground that it is a tradition rather than a religious practice. According to this Egyptian representative of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) committee, the practice is an African tradition and is not informed by a religious underpinning. For context, Egypt legally banned the practice in 2007 and is actively regulating their laws to ensure the eradication of FGM, thus effectively removing the legitimacy of the practice. The framing of the practice as a tradition is also present in the data set and it will be discussed later.

Excerpt 5

*"Naéla Gabr from Egypt had told Putrajaya that FGM is an African tradition and **is not Islamic**, and even then it is no longer practised in many African countries and other Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia and Algeria."* (The Malay Mail, 21 February 2018)

Religion: Female circumcision as a religious obligation

Female circumcision is often represented as a religious obligation by several social actors supporting the practice. Excerpt 6 from *Free Malaysia Today* is an anecdotal opinion piece that depicts the

framing of the practice as a religious obligation, supported through the use of strategies of personal and role model authority. The personal authority cited in this excerpt is “every elderly person” whose utterance to the author contains a form of obligation modality as highlighted above. The elders, who can be inferred as a close reference network for the author, whose words may have a heavy influence in the support for practices especially cultural and traditional ones, acted as a role model authority in this excerpt.

Excerpt 6

*“In the days that followed, every elderly person I met assured me that **this was an Islamic practice obligatory for all Muslim women**” (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)*

Excerpts 7 to 9 demonstrate a supporting argument through the strategy of impersonal authority. The excerpts from *Free Malaysia Today* (Excerpt 7) and *The Malay Mail* (Excerpt 8) cited the national *fatwa* which endorses the practice, while excerpt 9 from *MalaysiaKini* (2019) also made a reference to the same *fatwa* in justifying their argument that the practice has a religious basis. As mentioned previously, this *fatwa* plays a pivotal role in endorsing the practice. The references to the *fatwa* form part of the strategy of impersonal authority, where the practice is justified through laws, rules, regulations, or guidelines. In this context, a *fatwa* represents a credible way of addressing issues pertaining to religious affairs in Malaysia. The cognate adjectives “obligatory” and “mandatory” have been used to linguistically realise the argumentation strategy of impersonal authority.

Excerpt 7

“In 2009, the Fatwa Committee of the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs ruled female circumcision obligatory for Muslims but “must be avoided if found to be harmful to health”, the report said.” (Free Malaysia Today, 7 March 2017)

Excerpt 8

“The Malaysian delegate had pointed out Malaysia follows the Shafie school of Islamic jurisprudence, and that FGM is obligatory under a 2009 decision by the national fatwa committee unless it brings harm to the girl.” (The Malay Mail, 21 February 2018)

Excerpt 9

*“Contrary to the statement by Sisters in Islam executive director Rozana Isa that FC is nothing more than a cultural tradition, **FC has a religious basis. The Fatwa Committee of the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs in 2009 stated that FC is mandatory.**” (MalaysiaKini, 26 January 2019)*

Religion: Female circumcision as an encouraged practice

Another framing that is related to religion is female circumcision as an encouraged practice. Excerpt 10 demonstrates the binary views that Muslim scholars have regarding female circumcision.

Excerpt 10

*“FC is different from FGM. The latter is forbidden in Islam as it would have an adverse effect on women. Muslim scholars have different views regarding the two. Some regard FC as compulsory as male circumcision, and **some regard it as “sunnah”, which means an act of worship that is encouraged in Islam, but not obligatory**. Those who practise it will be rewarded, but it is not a sin if it is not performed.” (New Straits Times, 23 December 2018)*

In this excerpt, an argument to support the practice is employed by distinguishing between female circumcision and female genital mutilation. This argument of difference reflects differences in the understanding of the practice of female circumcision and female genital mutilation. As seen in this excerpt, there are two representations of the practice in relation to how it is situated in Islam. First, it is represented “as compulsory as male circumcision”. The use of a cognate adjective “compulsory” projects a form of argumentation strategy through impersonal authority to support the practice. In addition, the practice is also assigned a discursive qualification through comparison to the practice of male circumcision, realised through the use of a figure of speech (simile). The second representation is the practice as a *sunnah*, or practices and traditions of *Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h.* that are encouraged to be followed by Muslims. Here, the practice is endorsed through reference to role model authority as an argumentative strategy. The linguistic realisation of this strategy is through the lexical selection of the word ‘*sunnah*’. Semantically, this word has a positive connotation attached to it as demonstrated in the quote “those who practise it will be rewarded”. The notion of *sunnah* is fundamental in Islamic jurisprudence due to the status of *Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h.* as the most notable figure in Islam. *Hadiths* or accounts of the sayings, practices and traditions of the Prophet may contain *sunnah* and the Islamic law is informed by *hadiths*. Thus, this excerpt represented the practice positively, as an encouraged practice.

Culture: Female circumcision as a cultural obligation and tradition

Female circumcision is also represented as a cultural obligation and tradition though sometimes, the attribution is not explicitly stated. For instance, this excerpt shows an argument used to support the practice using an argumentation strategy called the authority of conformity.

Excerpt 11

***“All of us went through it – you, your mom, your grandmother, your aunties, your cousins, everyone!”** (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)*

This excerpt demonstrates the use of high frequency modality through the line “all of us went through it”. An interesting point to note is that the rule of law and the rule of conformity may be conflated based on statistics (van Leeuwen, 2008). Van Leeuwen (2008) further asserted that “contemporary lawmakers increasingly believe that, if most people are doing it, it cannot be wrong and should be legalized”. This excerpt also shows the justification for female circumcision through the authority of tradition. The argument is presented in a way that shows the practice as a custom which carries enough weight to go unchallenged.

Another example of a similar representation can be seen in Excerpt 12. The authority of tradition is used as an argumentation strategy to justify the continuation of the practice of female circumcision. This is linguistically realised through the keyword “custom”, explicitly depicting it as a form of tradition. As in the previous excerpt, this example also employs the strategy of authority

of conformity. This is manifested through the use of explicit comparison to “our mothers”, “our grandmothers”, and “all our aunties and their cousins”. The legitimisation of the practice through authority of conformity has been accepted as normative or commonplace. Although the author does not support female circumcision in this article, the public views the practice as legitimate. The legitimising force behind the practice was borne out of a cultural habitus that is normative, thus, it went unquestioned by members of the community.

Excerpt 12

“Because our mothers had it done. And our grandmothers had it done. And all our aunties and their cousins had it done. And they think your daughter should do it too. Because it is part of the set of customs that we make practice (SIC) whenever babies are born.” (The Malay Mail, 1 February 2019)

Next, the argument mentioned in Excerpt 13 endorses the practice by explicitly ascribing it to a tradition. The practice of female circumcision is supported through the strategy of authority of tradition. The strategy is evident through the use of the keyword “tradition”. Before justifying it as a tradition, a rationale from the religious perspective is presented. The religious argument for this practice is rationalised as a practice that is “allowed, but not mandatory”. Here, the religious aspect of the practice is backgrounded by the strategy of authority of tradition. The argumentation strategy of the authority of conformity, which is linguistically realised through the use of high frequency modality “a lot of Malays” in the sentence “a lot of Malays do partake and have placed it as something that must be done”, has also been used to justify the practice.

Excerpt 13

*“However, the chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee for Rights and Gender Equality, Nor Azrina Surip, said female circumcision was often misunderstood as female genital mutilation. She added that female circumcision in Islam was allowed, but not mandatory. **“Actually, it is a tradition only in some parts of Malaysia. However, a lot of Malays do partake and have placed it as something that must be done.”*** (Free Malaysia Today, 23 January 2019)

Excerpt 14 shows a different argument that describes the practice from the cultural perspective. Previous examples display support for the practice using the strategies of authority of tradition and authority of conformity.

Excerpt 14

“At Malaysia’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on human rights last night, a representative of the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry defended the ongoing practice of the circumcision of female infants in the country as a “cultural obligation”. According to the Malay Mail, the representative, who was not named, had said so in response to recommendations from Swedish and Danish delegates. *“Malaysia objects to any practices that are harmful to young female babies and children. “Malaysia does not practise female genital mutilation (FGM), but **the practice of female circumcision on babies is allowed as it is part of a cultural obligation.** “[...] The type of circumcision practised is very mild and does not involve any cutting.”* (MalaysiaKini, 9 November 2018)

This excerpt shows an anomalous representation of the practice as a “cultural obligation”. The use of the cognate adjective “obligation” and other adjectives that are semantically aligned with it is a distinguishing characteristic that depicts the strategy of impersonal authority. This implies a certain legal condition on the culture though culture is typically not informed by any legal conditions. This anomaly displays a different example of how the practice is legitimised through the cultural perspective.

Health: Female circumcision as a risky practice and a practice devoid of health benefits

From the medical perspective, the practice is represented as risky. Excerpt 15 shows how the argument against the practice is justified using the strategy of analogies. This argumentation strategy is a subset of the strategy of moral evaluation.

Excerpt 15

*“As medical practitioners, we only carry out something with medical and scientific basis,” she said. **“Unlike male circumcision, there has not been any finding to show that FGM is beneficial. In fact, the procedure is risky.”**” (Free Malaysia Today, 17 October 2016)*

In this excerpt, comparison to male circumcision is drawn using the conjunction “unlike”. The word “unlike” also serves as a presupposition trigger that assumes that the practice of male circumcision has a benefit. Thus, the comparison between the two practices demonstrates the use of argument of disadvantage to argue against the practice of female circumcision. This comparison is also a predication strategy used to assign a quality to the practice: namely, that the practice is devoid of benefits. The referent to the practice of female circumcision in this excerpt is “FGM”, the abbreviated term for “female genital mutilation”. The use of this referential strategy displays the underlying ideology expressed by the speaker. The decision to use the term “FGM” instead of “female circumcision” is a telling move that reveals the stance taken by the speaker, who considers the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia as female genital mutilation.

Health: Female circumcision as a medicalised practice

From the health perspective, female circumcision is represented as a medicalised practice. This framing is consistent and present throughout the years. Excerpts 16 and 17 show the use of reference to authority as an argumentation strategy. In both these articles, the Ministry of Health is cited as the authority of reference that endorsed the practice by “allowing” the procedure to be conducted by hospitals and clinics. In the second excerpt, the practice was said to be allowed “only at government healthcare facilities”, though the first excerpt did not specify this. There is a discrepancy in relation to this information.

Excerpt 16

***“MOH allows hospitals and clinics to freely conduct the procedure.”** (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)*

Excerpt 17

***“Health ministry guidelines allow FGM/C but only at government healthcare facilities.”** (Free Malaysia Today, 7 March 2017)*

Excerpt 18 shows that there is another document by the same source of authority (Ministry of Health) that forbids the practice from being done at “all public facilities”. Despite the discrepancy in the information, the practice is proven to be medicalised at present. Through this excerpt, it can be presupposed that the prohibition does not apply to non-public or private facilities through the presupposition triggers of stressed constituent “all public facilities” and implicative verb “should extend” in the sentence that follows.

Excerpt 18

*“Its CEO Azrul Mohd Khalib said FGM was unlike male circumcision which has “clear, demonstrable benefits”, including improved hygiene and in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. “If there is no medical benefit, no religious obligation or any benefit whatsoever to performing female circumcision, then why do it?” **He said there was a health ministry circular which prohibits female circumcision in all public facilities.** “The ministry should extend that prohibition to all healthcare facilities, private and public.” (Free Malaysia Today, 6 February 2020)*

Health: Female circumcision as a mild practice, as a practice with minimal risk, and as a practice with no complications

The practice is also represented as a mild practice in mainstream and alternative news reports. In Excerpt 19 from *MalaysiaKini*, the argument of ‘mildness’ of practice is used to justify the practice.

Excerpt 19

*“[...] **The type of circumcision practised is very mild and does not involve any cutting.**” (MalaysiaKini, 9 November 2018)*

This assertion explicitly mentions that “the type of circumcision...does not involve any cutting”, which is a definite description that presupposes the existence of other types of circumcisions which involve cutting. The employment of the argument of mildness of practice here supports the practice by implying that the practice is merely symbolic. A similar sentiment is evident in Excerpt 20.

Excerpt 20

*“However, the chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee for Rights and Gender Equality, Nor Azrina Surip, said female circumcision was often misunderstood as female genital mutilation. She added that female circumcision in Islam was allowed, but not mandatory. “Actually, it is a tradition only in some parts of Malaysia. However, a lot of Malays do partake and have placed it as something that must be done. “I understand their concerns, but the practice in Malaysia is not female genital mutilation,” she said. She also argued that **the method of female circumcision practised in Malaysia was not as extreme as genital mutilation, whereby some part or the whole external female genitalia, including the labia and clitoris, are removed.** “The medical operation is minor and often does not draw blood,” she said.” (Free Malaysia Today, 23 January 2019)*

The argumentation strategy demonstrated in this excerpt supports the practice through moral evaluation. The linguistic realisation takes the form of analogies by drawing an explicit comparison to “genital mutilation”, simultaneously reinforcing the argument of mildness of practice. Additionally, the strategy of theoretical legitimisation is employed. The sentence “The medical operation is minor

and often does not draw blood” is a form of theoretical legitimisation through definition, using attributive “is” to accentuate the mildness of the practice and through explanation, using generality to describe the experiences of the actors involved in the practice. Additionally, naming the procedure as a “medical operation” is a demonstration of referential strategy that represents the medicalisation of the practice. Other than that, the social actors involved in the practice, that is baby girls, are backgrounded and not mentioned here, thus, completely erasing them from the media representation.

Both Excerpts 21 and 22 show the use of analogies in justifying the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia. An explicit comparison was drawn to the mutilation done in Africa, suggesting that female circumcision in Malaysia is not a form of mutilation, but a milder practice. Both excerpts however, attributed the practice as “cultural”.

Excerpt 21

*“She rejected comparisons with female circumcision as practised elsewhere, especially those in African nations that have been globally condemned as female genital mutilation (FGM). “That one, we are in discussions with the Ministry of Health, because so far, it is actually something that is cultural. **“We’ve had this since before, and this is one of the things they actually say that we’re not the same. The African, all the mutilation thing, but we will discuss and look at it. If it doesn’t give any benefit, then we should do something,”** Dr Wan Azizah, who is also deputy prime minister, told reporters in Parliament.” (The Malay Mail, 15 November 2018)*

Excerpt 22

*“In another development, Dr Dzulkefly said **the practice of infant female circumcision by Muslims in Malaysia differed from the female genital mutilation (FGM) being practised in other countries.** He said this in response to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia’s (Suhakam) statement slamming Putrajaya for making misleading statement concerning the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on human rights in Geneva, Switzerland when it (SIC) delegates reportedly defended the practice of FGM as a “cultural obligation” in Malaysia. **“Infant female circumcision differs from FGM** and we have to be very careful in discussing this issue as it involves various aspects, including that of social and culture,” he added.” (New Straits Times, 17 November 2018)*

Human rights: Female circumcision as a harmful practice, as a form of violence against women, and as a form of violation of human rights

This representation is through the lens of human rights. Excerpt 23 demonstrates an explicit positioning of the practice as harmful.

Excerpt 23

*“Sustainable Development Goal Five, on gender equality, includes nine targets, one of which is, **“Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation.”**” (MalaysiaKini, 29 April 2016)*

The argumentation strategy used here is related to moral evaluation by means of abstraction. The lexical choice of the word “harmful” counters the attempt to position the practice as moral. There is an element of interdiscursivity at play as well, as opposition to the practice is justified by relating it to the bigger picture of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda advocated by the United Nations, an international body, as shown in Excerpt 24.

Excerpt 24

“Around the world, more than one in three women face violence throughout their lifetime; 750 million women were married before the age of 18, and more than 250 million have undergone female genital mutilation.” (New Straits Times, 25 November 2017)

This excerpt from *New Straits Times* quotes part of the remarks made by the secretary-general of the United Nations, António Guterres, on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. In justifying opposition to the practice of female circumcision, arguments based on numbers and statistics are used. It is interesting to note that women have been aggregated in this excerpt (e.g., “more than 250 million”). As a strategy to represent social actors, aggregation is typically employed when writers intend to create an opinion that seemingly represents voices of the majority. Female circumcision is also referred as female genital mutilation, illustrating the use of a referential strategy. This reinforces the ideological stance taken by the United Nations. As the secretary-general of the United Nations, Guterres is the main spokesperson representing the organisation, which explains the use of these strategies to contest the practice. In the effort to oppose the practice, Guterres intensified his argument by presenting statistics.

Excerpt 25

*“Contemporary Egyptian scholar, Mohammad Salim el-Awa, has quoted a large number of prominent Muslim scholars, including Zayn al-Din al-‘Iraqi (d. 1403 CE), Muhammad b. Ali al-Shawkani (d. 1839 CE), Sayyid Sabiq (d. 2000 CE), Yusuf al-Qaradawi and others to say that the hadith is unreliable and should be discarded. Mohammad Salim draws the conclusion that **FGM is a violation of the physical safety of young girls**, and it is a fallacy to label FGM as permissible (mubah).”* (New Straits Times, 14 December 2018)

This excerpt exemplifies how female circumcision is opposed by arguing that it is a violation of the physical safety of young girls. The main social actor cited in this excerpt is a “contemporary Egyptian scholar”, presented as a social actor whose role is activated (e.g., “has quoted a large number of prominent Muslim scholars” and “draws the conclusion”). In contesting the practice, the referential strategy used in naming the practice of female circumcision as “FGM”, the abbreviated form of the term female genital mutilation, shows the view taken by the Egyptian scholar in this excerpt.

Gender: Female circumcision as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice, as a way of lowering sex drive, as a way of preventing ‘wildness’, as an honourable act, and as a taboo topic

From the gender perspective, the practice is represented as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice. These representations are evident in Excerpts 26 and 27 from an article in *Free Malaysia Today*.

Excerpt 26

*“FGM involves the removal of parts of the female genitalia and is controversial, with opponents saying **it was rooted in gender inequality**.”* (Free Malaysia Today, 17 October 2016)

Excerpt 27

*“Farouk said **such a practice stemmed from a patriarchal interpretation of culture and religion.**”*
(Free Malaysia Today, 17 October 2016)

The argumentation strategy used in this excerpt is delegitimisation through moral evaluation. There is no explicit linguistic realisation, but a moral abstraction is evidently involved. Its origin is attributed to patriarchal ideologies and gender inequality, notions that are closely related to human rights as well. Additionally, this is connected to the larger discourse of gender equality which is one of the items in the Sustainable Development Goals agenda that is championed by the United Nations.

Representations of female circumcision as a way of lowering women’s sex drive were found in news articles from 2016 and 2017. This is an exemplification of the strategy of means orientation, justifying the practice as serving a specific purpose, that is, in this context, lowering the sex drive. Additionally, an argument of advantage was also used, mentioning the practice as a way of “protecting young girls from committing sin”. An example of this can be seen in Excerpt 28.

Excerpt 28

*“**It lowers the sex drive, and protects young girls from committing sin,**” they said.* (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)

In the same article, female circumcision was also represented as a way of preventing ‘wildness’ (see Excerpt 29). As social actors, “Muslim girls” were passivated, represented as being at the receiving end of the activity. In this context, the Muslim girls are subjected social actors, treated as objects in the representation. This reinforces the notion that the Muslim girls have no say in the decision-making, especially because most of the time, they could not consent to the practice as they were too young to be aware of the practice.

Excerpt 29

*“**Muslim girls are cut to make sure they don’t grow up ‘wild’.**”* (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)

Further examples of these notions are shown in Excerpts 30 and 31, both of which show that female circumcision has been represented as an honourable practice. However, this is only represented in 2017 data because female circumcision was one of the issues raised on International Women’s Day, and news of the Perlis Fatwa Committee issuing a state-level *fatwa* on female circumcision was reported.

Excerpt 30

*“**Such ritual is often accepted within a community as it is perceived as a source of honour, and the failure to comply will expose the girls to social exclusion.**”* (The Star, 12 March 2017)

Excerpt 31

*“The decree did not specify the requirement for a woman to undergo FGM, but said **it is an ‘honour’ for those who need to go through with it.**” (The Malay Mail, 8 June 2017)*

The argument in Excerpt 30 justifies opposition against the practice by using theoretical rationalisation, stating that the notion of honour is only a perception, but it is held by the practicing community worldwide. It is a generalised statement that does not specifically talk about female circumcision in the Malaysian context, but it includes female circumcision in Malaysia as well. Excerpt 31 represents the Perlis *fatwa* as contradictory to the national *fatwa* and the Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur *fatwa*. The mention of the notion of honour, which was present in the *fatwa*, however, raises a question. This contradicts the argument opposing the practice because as mentioned in the first excerpt, “failure to comply will expose the girls to social exclusion”. Interestingly, the article is rather neutral and does not address the points that seem to be at odds with each other.

Excerpt 32 illustrates the use of analogy as a strategy to represent the private nature of female circumcision in contrast to male circumcision. Though this article by *Free Malaysia Today* contests the practice as a whole, the excerpt does not show the arguments opposing the practice. However, it can be inferred through the strategy of analogy used that female circumcision is different from male circumcision in that it may be considered taboo to openly speak about it

Excerpt 32

*“Unlike male circumcision which is celebrated with a kenduri, **female circumcision takes place in private.**” (Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2016)*

Excerpt 33 from *MalaysiaKini*, however, indicates support for the practice. This excerpt is from an article that refutes the arguments presented by those who are against the practice of female circumcision. In defending the practice, it said that there is an absence of correlation between the private nature of the practice and the manifestation of a harmful ideology. It is followed by a statement that female circumcision is different to “some cultural practices which have been banned in African countries”.

Excerpt 33

*“The fact that this practice is normally done in private by the family when a child is of a very young age that she is unlikely to remember it, and the fact that FC is hardly a subject one discusses openly, **there is simply no correlation that the practice confers a harmful ideology.** This is, of course, in contrast to some cultural practices which have been banned in African countries, as much older girls are subject to surgery that technically suture their labia minora or labia majora as a form of FGM.” (MalaysiaKini, 26 January 2019)*

The argumentation strategy used here is the use of analogy to contrast female circumcision with female genital mutilation as done in some African countries. In short, the use of negative comparison means that the practice is, by default, legitimate because it is dissimilar to the negatively viewed practice done in some parts of Africa. However, this excerpt does not negate the fact that the practice is done in private, which again, amplifies the notion of taboo that may be related to the practice. Though it is infrequently mentioned, it is still a significant representation of the practice.

Saliency of representations of female circumcision in English news articles

The most salient representations in the English news articles are female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis, female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, and female circumcision as a mild practice. The most prominent representation, which is female circumcision as devoid of religious basis, plainly argues against the practice of female circumcision, foregrounding evidence that opposes the other side of the argument which suggests that female circumcision has a religious basis, either stating that it is a compulsory or mandatory or obligatory in Islam, or encouraged. Of course, the issue of *fatwa* is central to the supporting and opposing arguments as it was used to both justify and contest the practice. As seen from the earlier examples, a *fatwa* holds a substantive position in the religious discourse and practices in Malaysia. Although it is not legally binding, it is a point of reference for Malaysian Muslims when it comes to religious practices. However, the substantiality of the *fatwa* was also questioned for these very reasons. The power of a *fatwa* as an integral part of Islam in Malaysia (and the rest of the Islamic world) is open to question because as it stands, 1) there exist different schools of thought in Islam, 2) opinions may change over time, even juristic opinions, as seen in the case of Egypt, and 3) religion can be politicised (Ainslie, 2015).

The second most prominent representation in the English news articles, female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, shows binary argumentative points: (1) it has been used to justify the practice, more often by authority of conformity and authority of tradition, and (2) it has been used to contest the practice because “*culture can change*” (*Free Malaysia Today*, 23 January 2019). The two sides of the arguments co-occur contradictorily, creating contestation in the representation. However, it has been used to show support for the practice more prominently than opposition against it.

The third most prominent representation in the English news articles is female circumcision as a mild practice. This is largely the stance taken by the Malaysian government, in response to the comments made during the United Nations’ Universal Periodic Review in 2018. People representing the Malaysian government, for example the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development and Minister of Health, refuted the arguments that Malaysia practices Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), asserting that female circumcision is not FGM. This representation plainly endorses the practice on the ground that it is a mild practice.

2.3.4 Argumentative strategies used to represent female circumcision in Malay news sites

The aim of this section is to discuss the detailed breakdown of the thematic frames and subframes that constitute the arguments found in the Malay data. These findings are based on the analysis of textual patterns from the word choices of the reporters representing the media, which reveal their arguments either supporting or opposing the practice of female circumcision. Most importantly, this analysis also shows how they represent individuals, stakeholders and the practice itself in the discourses surrounding it. Table 5 shows the overall frame and its individual subframes identified in the Malay media.

Table 5. *List of arguments found in the Malay news sites*

| Arguments supporting female circumcision | Thematic frames | Arguments against female circumcision |
|--|------------------------|--|
| Female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as a socially expected practice | Culture and tradition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female circumcision as an outdated cultural practice and tradition |

Table 5. *List of arguments found in the Malay news sites (continued)*

| Arguments supporting female circumcision | Thematic frames | Arguments against female circumcision |
|--|------------------------|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a woman's right • Female circumcision as a separate concept from female genital mutilation | Human rights | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a harmful practice • Female circumcision as a form of violence against women • Female circumcision as a form of violence against humans' rights |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a religious obligation • Female circumcision as an encouraged practice • Female circumcision as a politicised religious issue | Religion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis • Female circumcision as a permissible practice only |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a practice with no medical complications • Female circumcision as a medicalised practice • Female circumcision as a hygienic and/or medically beneficial practice • Female circumcision as a mild or harmless practice | Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a risky practice • Female circumcision as a practice devoid of health benefits • Female circumcision as a practice devoid of clear guidelines |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a way of lowering sex drive and controlling sexual urges • Female circumcision as a way of controlling 'wildness' • Female circumcision as an honourable act • Female circumcision as a practice akin to male circumcision | Gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female circumcision as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice • Female circumcision as suppressing women's natural bodies |

As can be gleaned from Table 5, there is a diverse set of arguments concerning the practice of female circumcision and its related topics, involving points that are in favour of the practice, and others condemning the activity. There are five prominent frames that outline the discussion of female circumcision in the Malay media: culture and tradition, human rights, religion, health, as well as gender. Beginning with the culture and tradition frame that supports the practice, two salient subframes can be identified which include asserting female circumcision as a normal cultural practice and part of tradition, and branding female circumcision as a socially expected practice. However, the Malay media that opposes female circumcision claims that it is an outdated cultural practice and tradition.

In terms of the human rights aspect, two common subthemes were found to support female circumcision - female circumcision as a woman's right (i.e., the woman who chooses to have female circumcision performed on themselves should be respected for her choice), as well as the differentiation between female circumcision and the more severe practice of female genital mutilation. In contrast, arguments that countered these views maintained the view of female circumcision as a harmful practice, an act of violence against women, and an overall transgression of human rights.

There are also three further subframes contributing to the perspective of religion, particularly in discussing Islam and supporting the practice of female circumcision. According to the Malay media that endorsed the practice, female circumcision is part of the Islamic obligations expected to be fulfilled by Muslim women/girls, as an encouraged practice as well as a politicised religious issue. On the other hand, arguments against female circumcision in Malaysia portrayed the practice as a custom that lacks religious basis, and that it is only a permissible practice rather than an obligatory duty among Muslim women/girls.

Looking at the health frame, some of the Malay media represented female circumcision as a medically sound practice with little to no risk for the recipients, a medicalised practice that is carried out by health workers or trained individuals, as well as a practice that promotes hygiene and/or medical benefits. Conversely, to oppose these representations, the Malay media also described female circumcision as a risky practice that has failed to provide its recipients with any health benefits, and stated that the procedures were mostly carried out without clear standard guidelines.

The final frame shown in Table 5 refers to the gender frame that outlines several distinct representations of female circumcision in the Malay media. The practice is depicted as an avenue to control women's sexuality, particularly in lowering their sex drive and sexual urges. Furthermore, it is also portrayed as a proactive measure to curb women's "wild" nature, as the uncircumcised genitalia are thought to trigger unwanted sensations in women. This is followed by other arguments that support the practice, including signifying female circumcision as an honourable act among women which is akin to male circumcision. From another perspective, female circumcision is depicted as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice, as well as a practice that suppresses women's natural bodies and self-acceptance.

Culture and tradition: Female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, as well as a socially expected practice

In many instances in the Malay news media, female circumcision is put forward as being deeply rooted in the Malay culture and Islam. This is most often used to create leverage in legitimising the practice and providing the practicing community authority to continue with the custom when no formal or official regulations exist, or are vague. For instance, Excerpts 34 and 35 show how authorisation by tradition was used through specific keywords that denote "tradition", "custom", "norm" and others. In this case, the phrases identified were "*norma agama*" and "*amalan biasa*". Words such as these carry a heavy weight in reinforcing that female circumcision is a normal aspect of a woman's life, and therefore, the practice is justified. Another strategy justifying the practice is custom-conformity strategy, which justifies the practice based on implicit insinuations such as "everybody else does it, so we should too". An example can be found in the phrase "*kebanyakan orang lain juga melakukannya selama beberapa generasi*" which appeared frequently in the Malay media; its legitimisation relies on the description of the similar actions and practices of others. In other words, arguments such as this suggest that the practice is widely supported and practiced.

Excerpt 34

Tapi hari ini, ia telah menjadi satu norma agama yang ibu bapa boleh dapatkan untuk anak-anak mereka, sebab kebanyakan orang lain juga melakukannya selama beberapa generasi. (SAYS, 23 September 2015)

Excerpt 35

*Berkhatan, bersunat atau berkhitan bayi perempuan, adalah **amalan biasa bagi masyarakat Melayu Islam di negara ini**. Ia membabitkan prosedur yang selamat, tidak menyakitkan serta tidak menjejaskan perkembangan bayi. (The Asian Parent, 6 November 2018)*

Next, Excerpt 36 highlights one of the several examples of arguments in which the religious perspective is interwoven with culture in an effort to fortify the authority of tradition and conformity to the practice. Female circumcision and its affiliation with religion, for example, “*tuntutan agama*” (religious obligation) and “*ibadah yang disyariatkan*” are sometimes joined with high frequency modality, such as “*orang Melayu Islam yang rata-rata bermazhab Shafie*” and as mentioned previously “*orang lain juga melakukannya*”. This results in little space for discussion when local culture expectations and religion are fused together to create pressure for the practice to be carried out and accepted as the norm. Moreover, the frequent association between female circumcision, “*budaya*” (culture) and religious conventions also neutralises the severity of the practice by placing positive connotations on it (e.g., a practice shared within a large community).

Excerpt 36

*... orang Melayu Islam yang rata-rata bermazhab Shafie, **mengamalkannya secara berleluasa. Malah, ia dianggap tuntutan agama**. (Harian Metro, 20 September 2016)*

Excerpts 37 and 38 demonstrate how in some instances female circumcision is represented more intensely as a cultural obligation. These excerpts are related to the CEDAW 2018 report publication in which the Malaysian government was reprimanded for a statement made by the then minister of Women, Family and Community Development Dr. Wan Azizah, who described female circumcision among young babies as part of a mild local culture that differs from the more severe practices in Africa.

Excerpt 37

*Beliau (Dr. Wan Azizah) mengulangi pendirian kementeriannya kepada Pertubuhan Bangsa-bangsa Bersatu (PBB) bahawa **amalan itu hanya melibatkan bayi dan lebih bersifat budaya...** “**Kami sedang dalam perbincangan dengan kementerian kesihatan, kerana ia sebenarnya lebih kepada budaya yang telah diamalkan sejak sekian lama**”. (Malaysiakini, 15 November 2018)*

Excerpt 38

*Beliau (Dr. Wan Azizah) berkata demikian ketika diminta mengulas kenyataan Suhakam pada Rabu bahawa Putrajaya telah mengelirukan kajian Laporan Berkala Sejahtera (UPR) mengenai hak asasi manusia berhubung FGM apabila ia **mempertahankan FGM ke atas bayi perempuan sebagai ‘tanggungjawab budaya’ di Malaysia**. (Astro Awani, 17 November 2018)*

Despite the fact that there are no actual legal obligations to perform female circumcision, the use of imperative adjectives such as “*tanggungjawab (budaya)*” or cultural obligation were used. Legitimation through impersonal authority strategy is commonly used in reference to the law, the

government, policies and other related authorities (van Leeuwen, 2008). However, in this case, the strategy was used to create the impression that female circumcision is bounded by legal obligations to which the community must abide. Through the use of this argumentative strategy, a profound level of obligation and conformity in relation to the practice is created.

Culture and tradition: Female circumcision as an outdated cultural practice and tradition

In the culture and tradition frame, there were also some rare cases in which female circumcision was depicted as an outdated cultural practice and tradition. This was represented by Malay news articles that were not in favour of female circumcision. Excerpts 39 and 40 show how the practice is rationalised as irrelevant to the present day through historical and Islamic justification or reference.

Excerpt 39

*Khitan perempuan atau khafzh bukanlah sesuatu perbincangan yang baru dalam dalam wacana keislaman, bahkan **amalan khafzh telah dilakukan sebelum dari kedatangan Islam lagi sebagai satu bentuk tradisi masyarakat kuno.*** (Malaysiakini, 29 January 2019)

Excerpt 40

*Sayyid Sabiq dalam Fiqh Al Sunnah turut menyatakan bahawa khitan perempuan adalah dengan memotong bahagian teratas dari faraj (vagina) dan **tindakan itu adalah sunnah qadimah (tradisi yang dilakukan oleh orang terdahulu).*** (Malaysiakini, 29 January 2019)

The terms “*tradisi kuno*” and “*sunnah qadimah*” were intentionally used here to argue that while female circumcision is a permissible and recognised practice in Islam, it is also allowed to be criticised when necessary, particularly in terms of its relevance to the community. This argument originates from the term *sunnah qadimah* in Islam which refers to a practice derived from human culture that is limited by several factors such as time (relevance of its practice), and is not considered as part of God’s command (Augus Hermanto, 2016). The excerpt shows how the strategy of recontextualisation (i.e., bringing forth re-evaluation of the historical context and concept of female circumcision) is used. This involves changing the understanding of female circumcision, from seeing it as a rigid, unquestionable practice to one that can be critically analysed in terms of its relevance today.

Human rights: Female circumcision as a woman’s right

From the human rights perspective, female circumcision is represented as part of a woman’s rights. Excerpt 41 shows a description in which the practice is linked to a woman’s choice to undergo the female circumcision procedure.

Excerpt 41

*Tambah Dr Asri, amalan itu juga tidak mempunyai sebarang manfaat kesihatan dan belum pernah dibuktikan secara saintifik. “Saya rasa **kita tak perlu teruskan amalan ini melainkan perempuan itu sudah dewasa dan dia memilih untuk melakukannya. Itu terpulang kepada individu berkenaan,**” katanya lagi.* (mStar, 5 November 2018)

The argumentation strategy used in the excerpt involves moral evaluation by abstraction, which means that this passage focuses on the morally positive aspects of female circumcision. The moral claim that is made in the excerpt is that the practice is aligned with and respects a woman's choice to accept and undergo female circumcision, for example, through the phrases "*dia* (the woman) *memilih untuk melakukannya*" and "*itu terpulang kepada individu berkenaan*". This argument complicates potential discussions on challenging or delegitimising the practice, by positioning it as an acceptable social moral act for women who may see a need for the practice for themselves. Furthermore, female circumcision is depicted as empowering the recipients as the authority to carry out the procedure depends on their consent.

Human rights: Female circumcision is a separate concept from female genital mutilation

The practice of female circumcision is also portrayed as being completely different from female genital mutilation (FGM). Excerpts 42 and 43 provide examples where an argument strategy was used to ensure that the practice of female circumcision appears better or less extreme than FGM.

Excerpt 42

*Menurut Dr Wan Azizah, perbincangan itu termasuk melihat kepada faedah daripada amalan berkenaan, serta menambah walaupun ia dilihat sebagai **amalan budaya di Malaysia, ia tidak sama dengan amalan FGM yang diamalkan dalam kalangan wanita di Afrika**. (Astro Awani, 17 November 2018)*

Excerpt 43

*"Saya (Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad) nyatakan sekali lagi bahawa **khitan bayi perempuan tidak sama dengan FGM** dan kita perlu cermat dalam isu ini kerana ia menyinggung banyak aspek termasuk sosial dan budaya," katanya. (Astro Awani, 17 November 2018)*

The argument strategy as seen in these excerpts applied the fallacy of moral equivalence which depends on 'lesser evil' arguments and moral 'double standards' (Shorten, 2011). In the case of this study, the argument draws attention towards how FGM as performed among women in Africa is a more severe practice in comparison to female circumcision in Malaysia. The reasoning that the practice of female circumcision is not the same or extreme as female genital mutilation is a strategy of legitimisation through analogy (van Leeuwen, 2008) of the practice carried out in Malaysia.

Excerpt 44 uses religion to justify the practice through the impersonal authority of Islamic regulations. Based on how female circumcision is meant to be practiced according to Islamic guidelines, it is put forward as moderate or mild because of the scale on which the procedure is carried out, involving only a slight cut on female babies. The use of positive adjectives such as "*melakukan sedikit*" works to minimise the severity of the practice in comparison to FGM.

Excerpt 44

***Potong Kemaluan Perempuan (Female Genital Mutilation) seperti yang digambarkan oleh WHO itu tidak sama dengan khitan alam melayu Islam di sekitar Nusantara ini. Adakah kedua-dua benua itu melakukan khitan bayi perempuan dengan kaedah yang sama? Kategori khitan wanita yang WHO nyatakan itu sudah terkeluar dari amalan tradisi negara Malaysia sejak sekian kurun lamanya, di mana amalan tradisinya melakukan sedikit kelentit dengan jarum atau pisau khas.** (Harakah Daily, 16 January 2018)*

Human rights: Female circumcision as a harmful practice, a form of violence against women, and a form of violence against human rights

From the perspective of reports opposed to female circumcision, the practice is harmful to the recipients, a form of violence against women and, overall, infringes human rights. Excerpts 45 to 47 include descriptions of female circumcision that suggest the practice is both harmful and damaging to women/girls.

Excerpt 45

*Menurut laporan Astro Awani, wakil Kementerian menjelaskan bahawa amalan mengkhatakan anak perempuan adalah satu budaya, bahkan Tabung Kanak-Kanak Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu (UNICEF) berkata **amalan sunat merupakan pencabulan hak remaja dan wanita**. (Lobak Merah, 2018)*

Excerpt 46

*“Mufti Wilayah perseketuan pernah menulis dalam laman rasmi beliau berkaitan isu ini. Kata beliau; “Timbul isu dalam kalangan masyarakat bahawa **khatan wanita mencacatkan anggota** dan tafsiran bahawa khatan wanita itu tidak disyariatkan di dalam Islam. Sebenarnya kami berpendapat isu ini berpunca daripada **pengamalan budaya yang bukan Islam dan kejahilan sebahagian orang yang mengendalikan khatan yang melampau sehingga mencacatkan fungsi kemaluan wanita**.” (Lobak Merah, 2018)*

Excerpt 47

“Kita harus melarang dan menjadikan khatan wanita jenayah bagi melindungi bayi dan kanak-kanak daripada mudarat,” kata Azrul. (Malaysiakini, 6 February 2020)

The practice is portrayed as excessive and harmful in some reports, which negatively characterised female circumcision through adjectives and phrases such as “*pencabulan hak remaja dan wanita*”, “*mencacatkan anggota*” and “*mudarat*”. These statements highlight the idea that the practice is harmful, associating it with disfigurement of women’s reproductive organs and violation of their rights. Furthermore, it was pointed out that social and cultural pressures that support this harmful practice (refer to first excerpt) endanger women/children’s rights.

Religion: Female circumcision as an obligatory and encouraged religious practice

Female circumcision is repeatedly represented by arguments that state the practice is obligatory and highly encouraged in Islam. Excerpts 48 and 49 show several examples of strategies such as the use of impersonal authority through Islamic law and expert authority to legitimise the practice from a religious perspective.

Excerpt 48

Mengkhatakan anak berkhatan adalah wajib bagi lelaki dan perempuan di sisi ulama mazhab Syafie. (Harian Metro, 20 September, 2016)

Excerpt 49

Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Jakim) melalui Jawatankuasa Fatwa Kebangsaan pada 2009 menyatakan hukum berkhitan untuk golongan perempuan adalah wajib dan doktor berkaitan serta pakar akan mengeluarkan panduan untuk menjalankan prosedur berkenaan. (mStar, 5 November 2018)

The strategy of impersonal authority legitimisation uses adjectives that indicate obligation, such as “*wajib*”, “*disyariatkan*” and “*tidak boleh menidakkan*”, as well as referring to relevant religious bodies, *fatwa*, the Islamic school of thought (“*Mazhab Syafie*”), and organisations such as *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM)* and *Jawatankuasa Fatwa Kebangsaan*. The inclusion of *fatwa* serves as a powerful tool in providing justification for the practice because *fatwa* are meant to clarify and issue Islamic law. As can be seen, impersonal authority linking to *fatwa* was often used to legitimise female circumcision among practising Muslim communities in Malaysia.

Further, there are also cases in which, under the expert authority strategy, personal authority was used as seen in Excerpt 50. This argumentation strategy was realised by involving an individualised authority with expertise and influence in the area of Islamic rulings. The person was explicitly mentioned in the text, along with his qualifications, to further legitimise and endorse the practice of female circumcision.

Excerpt 50

Berkata Prof. Dr. Wahbah al-Zuhaili: “Berkhatan itu disyariatkan, dan tidak ada pendapat yang boleh menidakkan perkara ini sama ada bagi lelaki mahupun wanita. Yang penting adalah hendaklah ianya disempurnakan oleh doktor yang dipercayai. (Lobak Merah, 2018)

Religion: Female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis

Certain Malay news media that opposed female circumcision also represented the practice as lacking any credible religious basis. The following excerpts demonstrate the framing of female circumcision as not having support from the Quran and *hadiths*. Excerpt 51 points towards the absence of expert medical opinion endorsing the practice of female circumcision. This is followed by an impersonal authority through the *fatwa* from Perlis which indicates that if there is no medical necessity for the practice to be carried out, female circumcision should not be a requirement and is not obligated upon the Muslim community. This statement identifies female circumcision as a conditional practice that is allowed when medically necessary; it presupposes that the risks in the procedure would be eliminated when carried out correctly by medical experts. In other words, it is argued that female circumcision can be done correctly when a medical need arises, and if the procedure is managed by experts.

Excerpt 51

Amalan mengkhatakan bayi perempuan tanpa merujuk keperluannya kepada pakar tidak mempunyai asas berdasarkan dalil syarak. Bahkan, menurut fatwa Perlis, ia mungkin mendedahkan bayi kepada kemudaratan jika dilakukan secara salah. (Malaysiakini, 17 June 2017)

Excerpt 52 also highlights the strategy of expert authority by referring to Islamic scholars to delegitimise the practice of female circumcision. The expert authority strategy of including prominent

Islamic scholars who were perceived as experts in *hadiths* was used as a means to invalidate weak *hadiths* regarding female circumcision. The argument is constructed to layer the delegitimisation process of a particular hadith from one Islamic scholar to another (i.e., from Abu Dawud and Shuib Al Arnauth). Thus, this act of legitimation by foregrounding Islamic scholars' expert authority suggests that the practice of female circumcision is devoid of religious basis.

Excerpt 52

Sekiranya diteliti hadith-hadith yang menjadi sandaran para ulama yang mewajibkan khitan perempuan, kebanyakan berstatus dhaif, misalnya hadith yang dirujuk oleh Wafiq – “Khitanlah dan jangan berlebih-lebihan kerana yang demikian itu akan mencantikan wajah dan menyenangkan suaminya”. Hadith ini dikeluarkan oleh Abu Dawud dalam Sunannya dan di dhaifkan oleh Abu Dawud sendiri dan di dhaifkan oleh ulama hadith kontemporari, Shuib Al Arnauth. (Malaysiakini, 29 January 2019)

Excerpt 53 similarly uses the argument strategy of expert authority to justify opposition to female circumcision, on the grounds of it being devoid of religious basis. The use of expert authority in this excerpt conferred legitimation from several Islamic institutions, with additional information to emphasise their authority in the matter. For example, the mention of Dar al-Ifta al Misriyyah or the Egyptian Islamic advisory was followed by details of it being the main religious body in Egypt. This amplifies the importance of their judgment against the practice of female circumcision. Furthermore, another argument was used through the phrase “*khitan perempuan boleh dikesan daripada tradisi sebelum Islam*” which connotes that the practice may be more cultural than it is religious.

Excerpt 53

“FGM dibuat kerana kepercayaan agama dan kewajipan budaya. Islam tidak memperkenalkan khitan perempuan sebagai amalan untuk orang Islam, dan khitan perempuan boleh dikesan daripada tradisi sebelum Islam,” katanya. Katanya, Dar al-Ifta al Misriyyah, antara badan agama yang utama di Mesir, bersama Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, Universiti Al-Azhar, dan Kementerian Wakaf Mesir, mengisytiharkan semua bentuk FGM sebagai dilarang agama pada Mei 2018. (Malaysiakini, 6 February 2020)

Health: Female circumcision as a medicalised practice with no medical complications, and as a mild or harmless practice

Based on the health frame, female circumcision has also been represented as a mild and safe practice for the community. The representation can be seen in the two excerpts by *SAYS* and *Malaysiakini* (Excerpts 54 and 55) that show how the argument of mildness and harmlessness in the practice of female circumcision was used for legitimation. The argument used to reinforce this representation of female circumcision describes the practice as a simple procedure that only involves a small cut. In the second excerpt from *Malaysiakini*, the practice is said to not involve any cutting which suggests that there is a variety of methods for carrying out female circumcision, and that they are generally for symbolic purposes.

Excerpt 54

Terdapat juga hujah yang mengatakan sunat perempuan ini tidak menyakitkan kerana jumlah kulit yang disingkirkan itu terlalu kecil. (SAYS, 23 September 2015)

Excerpt 55

*Beliau terus mengatakan bahawa **berkhatan wanita yang dilakukan pada bayi tidak berbahaya, sedikit sahaja, ringan dan tidak melibatkan pemotongan.** (Malaysiakini, 15 November 2018)*

Furthermore, the practice of female circumcision is also described as a medicalised practice to legitimise claims of safety for women/children. Excerpt 56 from *Utusan* highlights how the practice is extensively available in public and private hospitals and clinics.

Excerpt 56

***Bagaimanapun kini hospital dan klinik perbidanan turut menyediakan khidmat khatan** untuk bayi atau kanak-kanak perempuan... Malah, ramai juga kanak-kanak perempuan yang dikhatankan seurus selepas dilahirkan. Hari ini terdapat **banyak hospital dan klinik swasta selain kerajaan, menyediakan khidmat mengkhatan bayi perempuan.** Selain itu, anda juga boleh mendapatkan **bidan terlatih untuk melakukannya di rumah.** (Utusan, 23 December 2018)*

The strategy involving authority of conformity, as seen in “*ramai juga kanak-kanak perempuan yang dikhatankan seurus selepas dilahirkan*”, indicates that many people have opted for female circumcision. Furthermore, it also suggests that the procedure is safe because it is conducted in government and private healthcare facilities; thus, female circumcision is presented as a safe and trusted practice. Christoffersen-Deb (2005), suggests medicalised female circumcision is viewed to have fewer risks than the procedure that is carried out without medical sterile equipment. When female circumcision is frequently pictured as a safe medical procedure carried out by doctors and other medical personnel, it further reinforces the practice of female circumcision as a safe medicalised procedure.

Health: Female circumcision as a risky practice and with lack of guidelines, as well as devoid of health benefits

From the medical and health perspectives, the practice is described as a risky procedure that lacks medical guidelines. Furthermore, it is also presented as providing no health benefits. Excerpt 57 shows how female circumcision is portrayed as inappropriate because of the lack of scientific evidence, using the strategy of analogies. In the excerpt, an analogy is used to delegitimise the practice of female circumcision by drawing upon comparisons to the male circumcision. The phrase “*berbeza daripada lelaki*” signifies that male circumcision has benefits supported by scientific evidence as stated in the excerpt, while female circumcision lacks this. The argument also adds that unlike the former, female circumcision carries risks especially if “*kesilapan*” (an error) occurs because of how little researched the practice has been. The inconvenience and complications of female circumcision also overshadow those of male circumcision because of the limited mention of its risks, and thus, it is asserted that female circumcision is a risky practice.

Excerpt 57

*“... Berbeza bagi lelaki, **tiada kajian menunjukkan khatan perempuan memberikan manfaat, malah ada risiko berlakunya kesilapan ketika dilakukan,**” kata Dr Harlina kepada FMT. (Free Malaysia Today, 17 October 2016)*

The practice of female circumcision is also represented as a procedure that is not governed by any medical guidelines. Excerpt 58 from *mStar* shows how the doctors interviewed stated that they did not receive any standard guidelines on how to carry out female circumcisions.

Excerpt 58

*Kementerian Kesihatan pada 2012 mengumumkan bahawa pihaknya akan mengeluarkan garis panduan perubatan untuk amalan itu, **namun semua doktor yang ditemui R.AGE memaklumkan tidak pernah menerima arahan berkenaan.** (mStar, 5 November 2018)*

The legitimacy of the expert authority (i.e., medical doctors) carries some influence in arguing that female circumcision is a practice lacking guidelines. The mention of doctors was highlighted perhaps due to the underlying impression that they consist of authorities whose medical opinions and experience can be accepted as expert knowledge. In this particular case, female circumcision as carried out in the country's healthcare institutions is deemed by medical doctors to be a practice without guidelines. Reporting this issue from the perspective of doctors accentuates the dangers and risks of the practice, which therefore delegitimises the procedure and damages the prospect of supporting female circumcision.

Gender: Female circumcision as a form of gender inequality and a patriarchal practice, controlling women's sex drive and 'wildness', as well as an honourable act

Based on the gender frame, female circumcision is represented as a practice that promotes gender inequality and is a form of patriarchal practice. In Excerpt 59 female circumcision is depicted as a form of gender inequality particularly among women and young children.

Excerpt 59

...tujuan dari khitan lelaki adalah membersihkan najis yang tidak dapat keluar dari penis, sementara tujuan dari khitan perempuan adalah untuk menyeimbangkan syahwatnya. Ternyata, 'hikmah' dari amalan khitan perempuan adalah untuk menyeimbangkan nafsu perempuan agar tidak menjadi 'jalang'. Ramai yang mungkin tertanya-tanya adakah dalam Islam, sifat asal kejadian seorang perempuan itu- 'jalang' dan sumber kemaksiatan sehingga harus "disyariatkan" dengan khitan untuk menyembuhkan 'kejalangan' dan menutup sumber kemaksiatan? Inilah racun-racun patriakhi yang sudah melacurkan syariat dengan tafsiran-tafsiran misigonis terhadap perempuan. (Malaysiakini, 29 January 2019)

The argument strategy involved is to compare the purpose of male circumcision and female circumcision. According to the excerpt in *Malaysiakini*, male circumcision is practiced for men to benefit from better hygiene in the private area, whereas female circumcision has a different function, which is to lower woman's sexual agency and 'wildness'. The writer challenges the discriminatory equivalencies between the two types of circumcisions and the purposes they serve, which logically should be assumed to be similar. However, in this case, female recipients of this practice were represented as having to have their innate sexual drive be subjugated despite the fact that men and young boys are not constrained to similar expectations. The use of the word "hikmah" in single quotation marks emphasises the contradictory benefits that women receive from female circumcision as opposed to men. This is then followed by an analogy strategy: "Ramai yang mungkin tertanya-tanya adakah dalam Islam, sifat asal kejadian seorang perempuan itu- 'jalang' dan sumber kemaksiatan sehingga harus "disyariatkan" dengan khitan untuk menyembuhkan 'kejalangan' dan

menutup sumber kemaksiatan?”. This excerpt questions the morality of associating women’s innate sexual qualities to something that is sexually offensive that needs to be controlled or punished through female circumcision. The word “*disyariatkan*” is positioned such that it is equated with controlling women’s sexual drive; thus, this strategy further delegitimises female circumcision by presenting it as a form of suppression of women’s natural sexuality and a form of patriarchal practice.

Excerpt 60 from *Free Malaysia Today* shows how female circumcision is represented as a patriarchal practice. In this excerpt, female circumcision is explicitly described as both a practice devoid of religious basis and founded on patriarchal ideologies. The excerpt mentions a male role model authority, the Prophet Muhammad, who is deemed as a noble individual and leader in Islam; he is said to have not carried out the practice on any female children. This highlights the absence of direct support exemplified by the Prophet and thus, invalidates the practice of female circumcision in the practicing Muslim community.

Excerpt 60

*“Seperti yang dikatakannya, Nabi Muhammad tidak pernah mengkhatakan walau seorang bayi perempuan. Tindakan itu untuk menunjukkan ia bukan ajaran Islam,” katanya. Dr Farouk menyalahkan **penafsiran agama dan budaya yang bersifat patriarki (pro lelaki)** dalam masyarakat. (Free Malaysia Today, 17 October 2016)*

Saliency in representations of female circumcision in Malay news articles

There are several salient subframes that dominate the discourse of female circumcision in the Malay mainstream and alternative news sites, which include female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, female circumcision as a separate concept from female genital mutilation (FGM), as well as female circumcision as a practice that is devoid of religious basis.

Beginning with one of the prominent subframes in the Malay data, female circumcision is most often depicted as a cultural practice and part of tradition. This subframe is used to support the practice and to look at it positively by portraying it as an important ritual with connections to Malay cultural roots and religion. In some the Malay news media, this is also used as an argument against its continuation, by labelling it as an outdated custom as well as detaching its connection with Islam and suggesting that female circumcision is more of a cultural than a religious ritual. However, the balance of this discussion is outweighed by the former, and it is one of the primary points used in legitimising the practice.

Secondly, female circumcision is established several times as a practice that is incomparable to FGM. This subframe is applied mostly by Malay news media that are in favour of the practice. It sometimes appears simultaneously with the cultural frame in legitimising female circumcision, particularly when compared to female circumcisions that take place in other cultures, such as in some African countries, that involve extreme cutting of the female genitals or other methods. The argument strategy used to uphold the practice is the ‘lesser evil’ premise in which female circumcision is represented as milder and more appropriate than FGM, which leads it to being perceived as less problematic.

The third leading subframe includes female circumcision being represented as a practice devoid of any religious basis. This representation is mostly upheld by the media which opposes the practice by referring to Islamic references; for example, they cite passages from the Quran and *hadiths*, as well as quoting statements from prominent Muslim scholars. It has been observed that this subframe frequently co-occurs with others such as the medical frame in which the practice is not encouraged to be carried out without any medical necessity, as well as the gender frame where female circumcision is represented as a facet of patriarchy rather than for the benefit of women and young children.

3

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to identify prominent media representations of female circumcision as carried out in Malaysia. Based on the initial analysis of English and Malay news media from 2015 to 2020, it was found that in both English and Malay news sites, the highest number of articles published on FGM was in the years 2018 and 2019. It is believed that the increase of reporting activity may have been due to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Malaysian government's defensive response towards critical remarks raised by the UPR committee. Furthermore, analysis has shown that Malay news sites had fewer reports on the practice compared to English news sites; Malay news sites were also seen to provide more coverage on opinions that support female circumcision.

The study also investigated the social actors and voices that appeared in the English and Malay media. Through corpus analysis, it was found that people related to the practice such as the recipients of female circumcision (e.g., women, children, babies) appeared most frequently in comparison to other social actors such as the authorities comprising government officials, health authorities, religious figures, and organisations, as well as close reference networks for people related to the practice (e.g., parents, the local community/society) and international bodies. With that being said, the voices of women and children were consistently neglected and passivated, women and children were represented as beneficiaries of the practice. This is a sharp contrast to the representations of other social actors who had active agency and power over the practice of female circumcision such as the authorities, people related to the recipients of the practice and international organisations.

Furthermore, the study also closely examined the frames in the news reports focusing on representation of the practice and strategies involved in supporting or opposing female circumcision. Through frame analysis, findings show that English news articles had more arguments to dispute the practice of female circumcision, whereas the Malay articles largely had arguments that were more favourable towards the practice. The most salient representations found in the English news sites include female circumcision as a practice devoid of religious basis, female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, and female circumcision as a mild practice. Meanwhile, the Malay news articles predominantly resorted to representations concerning female circumcision as a cultural practice and part of tradition, female circumcision as a separate concept from female genital mutilation (FGM), as well as female circumcision as a practice that is devoid of religious basis.

Both Malay and English news articles gave prominence to the representation of female circumcision as a tradition and a practice that has cultural roots. With this in mind, female circumcision is a concern that must be treated carefully due to the sensitivities that may be evoked especially among the practicing Malay Muslim community. The (de)legitimisation of the practice seems to have been constructed and contested by constant intertextual reference to the national *fatwa* issued in

2009. This implies the significant force of legitimisation a *fatwa* holds, and thus, it can be inferred that there is a deeper issue regarding the handling of legal issues related to Islam and Muslims under the jurisdiction of the state legislature. This has probably contributed to the differing views and rulings on the practice, reinforcing the ambiguity and lack of clarity regarding the practice. There were clashing and competing discourses where, for example, discourses of religion and health were used as a justification for and contestation of the practice. Authorities were the central voices in the media, though some organisations such as non-government organisations and women's groups were also given access in the media. There was an oversaturation of the 'Westernised' human rights perspective, especially in the English news articles. Voices of people who are directly related to the practice were often backgrounded. The media plays a crucial role in raising awareness and educating their consumers regarding female circumcision, especially because it somewhat shapes the national discourse. Several strategic recommendations are drafted based on the key findings in this report:

A discursive media-based space to establish awareness and education

The implication of the findings is that as a result of conflicting discourses and clashing (de)legitimation by different authorities, there needs to be a discursive space that establishes an awareness-raising and educational media campaign, which is backed by authorities considered reliable by the practicing community. This must importantly target the practicing community, especially because there is a postulation that they do not view the practice as an issue. Discourses on the issue must be established to help the practicing community see the bigger picture and consider other perspectives.

Avoid oversaturation of discussion from the perspective of human rights

Other than that, the backgrounding of the voices of the practicing community and oversaturation of the 'Westernised' human rights perspective implies an echo chamber or epistemic bubble conjecture which can result in the reinforcement of the rejection of such perspectives. Moving forward, the 'Westernised' human rights perspective must be backgrounded and not be given central focus to ensure the practicing community does not resist different ideas and arguments in the beginning.

Include voices and narratives from the practicing community

This oversaturation of the 'Westernised' human rights perspective can also be addressed by diversifying voices in the media and moving towards an inclusionary approach by including voices of the practicing community to get to the root of the problem. Key to this is enabling a space to hear the voices and narratives of/by/on women who are involved and engaged in the practice.

Focus on localised and contextualized appeals

Additionally, the media must shift the focus of awareness-raising and educational media campaigns to a more localised and contextualised situation to suit and appeal to the masses, especially the majority of the practicing community, who currently sees no issue with the practice. The media plays a crucial role in raising awareness and educating their consumers regarding female circumcision, and need to reframe the reporting narrative to include the larger debate of Islamic bioethics, among others. Advocacy and policy making must inevitably engage with the media to reframe the existing discourses surrounding female circumcision, and initiate social change.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of articles from the English news sites from 2016 to 2020

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|---|------------------------------|---|---------------------|------------|
| 2016 | | | | |
| Nothing cut-and-dried about female circumcision | Fa Abdul | Not stated | Free Malaysia Today | 24/02/2016 |
| Time to ban child marriage in Malaysia | Heather Barr, Linda Lakhdhir | Human Rights Watch (HRW) (Heather Barr is a senior researcher on women's rights and Linda Lakhdhir is a legal adviser in HRW's Asia division) | MalaysiaKini | 29/04/2016 |
| Muslim doctors against female circumcision | Aedi Asri | FMT | Free Malaysia Today | 17/10/2016 |
| 2017 | | | | |
| Much to be done against abuse of women and children, says report | FMT Reporters | Free Malaysia Today | Free Malaysia Today | 07/03/2017 |
| Female genital mutilation | Not stated | The Star | The Star | 12/03/2017 |
| Perlis mufti decrees female circumcision optional, says no proof it cuts libido | No author | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 08/06/2017 |

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|--|--|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| End violence against women | António Guterres | United Nations Secretary-General | New Straits Times | 25/11/2017 |
| Gender-based quotas are an insult to M'sian women | Fa Abdul | Not stated | MalaysiaKini | 07/12/2017 |
| Ending gender based violence | Glorene A Das | Not stated | MalaysiaKini | 13/12/2017 |
| 2018 | | | | |
| In Geneva, UN committee tells Malaysia to eliminate FGM | No author | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 21/02/2018 |
| Malaysia urged to abolish female genital mutilation | Victoria Brown | The Star | The Star | 22/02/2018 |
| Cedaw report presented | Syalikha Sazili, Siti Nur Mas Erah Amran | New Straits Times | New Straits Times | 23/02/2018 |
| Girls get 'unkindest cut' at some clinics | Chen Yih Wen, Myrra Baity | The Star | The Star | 01/11/2018 |
| Women's ministry defends infant female circumcision at UN human rights review | No author | MalaysiaKini | MalaysiaKini | 09/11/2018 |
| Suhakam slams Putrajaya: Female genital mutilation not Malaysian culture | No author | The Star | The Star | 14/11/2018 |
| Suhakam slams 'misleading' comment on female circumcision at UN event | FMT Reporters | Free Malaysia Today | Free Malaysia Today | 14/11/2018 |
| DPM maintains that female circumcision is part of Malaysian culture | Hemananthani Sivanandam, Martin Carvalho, Rahimy Rahim | The Star | The Star | 15/11/2018 |
| DPM insists Malaysian female circumcision not mutilation, says it's 'cultural' | Yiswaree Palansamy | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 15/11/2018 |

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|--|--|--|---------------------|------------|
| Female circumcision part of Malaysian culture, says DPM | Veena Babulal | New Straits Times | New Straits Times | 15/11/2018 |
| Ministries studying female genital mutilation in Malaysia | Bernama | Bernama | Free Malaysia Today | 15/11/2018 |
| Defending female circumcision in Malaysia | Hemananthani Sivanandam, Martin Carvalho, Rahimy Rahim | The Star | The Star | 16/11/2018 |
| Vape, shisha not included in smoking ban, says Dzulkefly | No author | The Star | The Star | 17/11/2018 |
| Vape, shisha not included in smoking ban, says health minister | No author | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 17/11/2018 |
| Vape, shisha not included in smoking ban | Bernama | Bernama | Free Malaysia Today | 17/11/2018 |
| Wan Azizah has abdicated her responsibility towards infants | Bersih Sydney | Bersih Sydney | MalaysiaKini | 19/11/2018 |
| Female genital mutilation forbidden in Islam | Mohammad Hashim Kamali | International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia founding chief executive officer | New Straits Times | 14/12/2018 |
| Saifuddin: PH leaders should be more open to Rafizi's view | Fahmy Azril Rosli | New Straits Times | New Straits Times | 20/12/2018 |
| Differing views on practice | Saadah Khair | International Women's Alliance for Family and Quality Education activist | New Straits Times | 23/12/2018 |

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|---|---|--|---------------------|------------|
| 2019 | | | | |
| Do we need an Islamic state to be good Muslims? | Majidah Hashim | Sisters in Islam Communication Manager | MalaysiaKini | 03/01/2019 |
| Malaysia's critical role in a failed Muslim world | Sharifah Munirah Alatas | Not stated | Free Malaysia Today | 08/01/2019 |
| Stop female circumcision, it has no medical benefit, say women's groups | Melissa Darlyne Chow, Ainaa Aiman | Free Malaysia Today | Free Malaysia Today | 23/01/2019 |
| There's no basis for banning female circumcision | Dr Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar, Dr Nur Saadah Khair | International Women's Alliance for Family Institution and Quality Education (Associate Professor Dr Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar is President and Dr Nur Saadah Khair is Exco Member) | Free Malaysia Today | 26/01/2019 |
| No basis for banning female circumcision | Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar, Nur Saadah Khair | International Women's Alliance for Family Institution and Quality Education (Associate Professor Dr Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar is President and Dr Nur Saadah Khair is Exco Member) | MalaysiaKini | 26/01/2019 |
| No scientific data, medical evidence to justify female circumcision | Azrul Mohd Khalib | Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy Founder and CEO | Free Malaysia Today | 27/01/2019 |
| Squeamish reality about circumcising girls in Malaysia — Majidah Hashim | Majidah Hashim | Sisters in Islam Communication Manager | The Malay Mail | 01/02/2019 |
| Why Malaysia doesn't need female circumcision | Majidah Hashim | Sisters in Islam Communication Manager | Free Malaysia Today | 01/02/2019 |

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|--|---|---|----------------|------------|
| Malaysia must end female genital mutilation — Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women | Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women | Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women | The Malay Mail | 04/02/2019 |
| Women NGOs urge govt to ban female genital mutilation | No author | The Star | The Star | 04/02/2019 |
| Putting a stop to female genital mutilation in Malaysia | Dr Milton Lum | Federation of Private Medical Practitioners Associations and the Malaysian Medical Association past president | The Star | 05/03/2019 |
| Better protection for women | S. Indramalar | The Star | The Star | 08/03/2019 |
| Time to grow up, Malaysia | Tajuddin Rasdi, Tawfik Ismail, Siti Kasim, Lim Teck Ghee, Terence Gomez | Not stated | The Star | 13/03/2019 |
| Malaysia reneging on rights treaties? Wait for report, says foreign minister | Zurairi AR | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 10/04/2019 |
| Rights advocates worry conservatism hampering women's sexual, reproductive health | Zurairi AR | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 11/04/2019 |
| Double win for R.AGE at journalism awards in Hong Kong | No author | The Star | The Star | 29/05/2019 |
| Malaysia-based NGO help form Asia-Pacific network to end female genital mutilation | Julia Chan | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 03/06/2019 |

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|--|--------------------|---|---------------------|------------|
| Female circumcision and human rights | Apnizan Abdullah | International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia Research Fellow | New Straits Times | 07/08/2019 |
| A dark day for Malaysia, women's rights | Rozana Isa | Sisters in Islam Executive Director | Free Malaysia Today | 27/08/2019 |
| A dark day for Malaysia — Sisters in Islam | Sisters in Islam | Sisters in Islam | The Malay Mail | 27/08/2019 |
| A dark day for Malaysia | Sisters in Islam | Sisters in Islam | MalaysiaKini | 28/08/2019 |
| Malaysian women deserve better, advocacy group says after civil court shuts door on Sisters in Islam | Soo Wern Jun | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 30/08/2019 |
| UN's OHCHR ready to support Malaysia in human rights agenda | Michelle Bachelet | UN high commissioner for human rights and former president of Chile | MalaysiaKini | 05/10/2019 |
| For reform to truly work, G25 says parliamentary select committees need teeth | Syed Jaymal Zahiid | The Malay Mail | The Malay Mail | 28/10/2019 |
| The Malaysian legislative process for national development — G25 | G25 | G25 | The Malay Mail | 28/10/2019 |
| Spying is against Islam | Sisters in Islam | Sisters in Islam | MalaysiaKini | 05/12/2019 |
| 2020 | | | | |
| Put stop to female circumcision, SIS urges govt | Robin Augustin | Free Malaysia Today | Free Malaysia Today | 06/02/2020 |

Appendix B: List of articles from the Malay news sites from 2015 to 2020

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| 2015 | | | | |
| Kenapa Topik Sunat Perempuan Sangat 'Taboo' Untuk Kita Bincangkan? | Farouq Johari | SAYS | SAYS | 23/9/2015 |
| 2016 | | | | |
| Khatan perempuan tiada dalam Islam, kata pakar | Aedi Asri | Free Malaysia Today (FMT) | Free Malaysia Today (FMT) | 17/10/2016 |
| Berkhatan dapat menjaga kesucian lahiriah umat Islam | Not specified | Harian Metro | Harian Metro | 20/9/2016 |
| 2017 | | | | |
| Tiada asas khatan bayi perempuan tanpa rujuk pakar | Not specified | Malaysiakini | Malaysiakini | 7/6/2017 |
| 2018 | | | | |
| Prosedur khatan bayi perempuan selamat | Rabiatul Adawiyah Koh Abdullah | Utusan | Utusan | 23/12/2018 |
| Khatan bayi perempuan di Malaysia berbeza | Not specified | Bernama | Astro Awani | 17/11/2018 |
| TPM bincang dengan kementerian kesihatan isu khatan bayi perempuan | M Fakhru Halim | Malaysiakini | Malaysiakini | 15/11/2018 |
| Khatan perempuan: KPWKM akan bincang dengan Kementerian Kesihatan | Diyana Ibrahim | Astro Awani | Astro Awani | 15/11/2018 |
| Khitan Bayi Perempuan, Mudah & Cepat Rupanya! Bayi Pun Tak Nangis | Not specified | The Asian Parent | The Asian Parent | 6/11/2018 |

| Headline | Author | Author affiliation | News outlet | Date |
|--|--------------------------|---|---------------------------|------------|
| Khitan: Selamat atau tidak? | Not specified | Partially referred to R.AGE documentary "Amalan berkhitan di Malaysia Khitan" | mStar | 5/11/2018 |
| ADN Selat Klang khitan 34 bayi perempuan | Not specified | Harakah Daily | Harakah Daily | 15/1/2018 |
| Khitan anak perempuan | Dr Suhazeli Abdullah | suhazeli.com | Harakah Daily | 15/1/2018 |
| Penjelasan Telus Doktor Ini Kenapa Sunat Bukan Menzalimi Anak Perempuan Di Malaysia Dari Sudut Islam | Izuan Jelani | Lobak Merah | Lobak Merah | 15/1/2018 |
| 2019 | | | | |
| Bayi perempuan mudah khitan | Siti Zarinah Sahib | Harian Metro | Harian Metro | 1/1/2019 |
| Khitan perempuan: Menjawab kekeliruan Wafiq | Afiq Mohd Noor | Malaysia Kini | Malaysiakini | 29/1/2019 |
| Khatan tak 'seksa' bayi perempuan | Halina Mohd Noor | Berita Harian | Berita Harian | 16/3/2019 |
| Wakil PBB harap M'sia pastikan akses pendidikan, kerja buat Rohingya | Ramieza Wahid | Malaysiakini | Malaysiakini | 10/5/2019 |
| Khatan Bayi Perempuan | Nurul Fadhlin Che Ismail | Sihat Malaysia | Sihat Malaysia | 1/11/2019 |
| Isu Gatal & Khitan Tak Berkaitan - Dr. Hasbi Harun | Mastura Burhanuddin | Mingguan Wanita | Mingguan Wanita | 25/11/2019 |
| 2020 | | | | |
| Hentikan khatan perempuan, SIS gesa kerajaan | Robin Augustin | Free Malaysia Today (FMT) | Free Malaysia Today (FMT) | 2/6/2020 |