

## Opinion: Here's How We Should Be Handling Misogyny Appropriately



By Jumaiyah Mahathir

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Jumaiyah Mahathir, CEO of HalalFoodhunt, shares her thoughts on the recent controversy in Singapore involving local ustazahs who became victims of a lewd poll

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As I observed the conversations in the community unfolding for a week following the news coverage of the sexual harassment of ustazahs (female Islamic religious teachers), it becomes more and more apparent to me that sexual harassment is an issue that the Muslim community here has only begun to grapple with.

The lewd poll that sexually harassed the ustazahs first came to light when one of the victims, ustazah Fatin Afika, shared a screenshot that someone sent her. It alerted her that her photo was used, and she was named in a lewd poll that asked people to vote on "which ustazah should be gang-raped".

Within the same IG story, she noted that this was not the first time she became a target of sexual harassment within her community. Responding to her followers who asked her about making a report about such occurrences, she also shared about her disappointing experiences dealing with the authorities in her previous reports.

I was moved by the helplessness she felt in this case of sexual harassment.

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This issue then came to the attention of several high-profile men in the community, who shared the screengrab of that lewd poll on their own social media accounts to appeal for witnesses and information about the people who were responsible for the creation of that poll that had garnered than 1,000 voters before it was taken down and deleted.

To say that the community was in shock is an understatement.

As more people talked about it, whether in the form of sharing content, commenting on news articles or even a tweet, the root cause of this enabling of sexual harassment against women couldn't be clearer—it is the culture of misogyny within our society.

### MISOGYNY

It was very telling of the misogynistic mindset of the community when the initial few public reactions harshly criticised the victims. Some went as far as commenting that these ustazahs were "attractive" or blamed their choice of modest clothing and preference for wearing makeup, therefore inviting attention.

They even criticised the harmless photos and educational video content posted by the ustazah victims. Many talked about how these ustazahs should be instead wear the *niqab* (face veil), while others went to the extent of saying that ustazahs should not be posting any photos or videos of themselves on social media

I read in horror as some even broke down what should and should not be posted by ustazahs on social media, and others emphasised the importance of modesty.

Why are people focusing their attention on how women should do better to prevent sexual harassment? Why are we not addressing the men who are guilty of the offensive act with the same amount of energy, if not more? Why were women (who are the victims here, mind you) being policed for their modesty, activities on social media, and even their opinions against misogyny?

While I hope that the perpetrators are ultimately caught and dealt with to the fullest extent of the law, I also hope that the men in the community do not dissociate themselves from the problem, and therefore force the whole community to look at how we have enabled a misogynistic culture that consistently blames women for the offences that men commit.

## ON THE UNCONSCIOUS PERPETUATION OF CASUAL SEXISM AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

As the community grapples with this, I addressed my followers in a week-long series of Instagram stories breaking down 'rape culture' because I wanted to do my part in helping the community recognise it for what it is.

I wanted to draw the link between casual sexism and sexual assault for my audience and hopefully help them to understand that casual sexism isn't "just talk". I wanted my followers to know that engaging in casual sexism may potentially embolden some men to sexually assault the women around them, and therefore create an unsafe society for all women.

In that series, I highlighted that casual sexism is a form of culture that we have let men—and women, too—get away with for far too long. Casual sexism also includes lewd 'jokes' and that people seem to have trouble recognising that it is inappropriate.

To help my audience recognise it, I asked my followers to share examples of offensive statements and hurtful 'jokes' that they have heard in our community, and the responses from these ladies came in fast and furious.

These included:

- joking about being able to have four "slots" when it comes to marriage
- commenting on how attractive a female student or fellow female teacher was
- joking about sex when the topic was on pregnancy
- telling women that the sole reason for wearing the hijab is so that men will not be "tempted"
- during a parenting lecture, a preacher joked about how husbands should not "fight" with babies for milk from mothers

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There was plenty more than these points above, but you get the drift.

I felt the need to explicitly mention all these because I want people to recognise that these actions are commonplace and inappropriate. Engaging in this kind of speech is akin to encouraging casual sexism.

This "struggle" to identify what constitutes casual sexism was also demonstrated by a local male preacher, who initially chided people who flagged his speech for casual sexism. He later admitted that he now understood that "these words fall under casual sexism" in light of recent events". In his apology, he stated that he has to unlearn "every statement and action" which "contributes to this culture".

As we call out such impropriety, I also want to emphasise this: People should not be "excused" for their inappropriate behaviour and speech. When you are chided for not being able to "take a joke" or gaslighted when you are told that the offensive words were "taken out of context", be firm and stand your ground when you call them out. Calling out such behaviour helps create a safer world for women.

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WOMEN ARE NOT IMMUNE TO BEING MISOGYNISTIC EITHER

As the community grapples with this, we need to recognise that misogyny has been around in our community for much longer than the existing generations, and is therefore rooted in our perceptions of right and wrong.

I also felt there was a need for me to highlight that women too can be misogynistic and that these are cultures that can be learned and internalised over time.

For instance, a woman may not realise that she is making the world unsafe for women, if she too engages in casual sexism together with the men, because she has been desensitised to the impropriety of such talk and no longer feels offended when someone talks about her body. Perhaps, she was taught to take it as a compliment if a man catcalls her or passes on other comments.

The most obvious form of women expressing their learned misogyny is when they decide to blame sexual harassment victims for "asking for it" while excusing the men.

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**WHAT CAN AND MUST BE DONE**

Resisting misogyny starts with tackling the smaller problems that are a part of this much bigger problem. To make society safer for women, we should improve how we teach our boys to handle their bodies and minds.

Some victims have shared with me that years after experiencing sexual harassment in school, these boys (now men) apologised for their ignorance. This can easily be avoided if boys understand how to express their feelings appropriately.

Let's teach boys the right way to love people, especially their friends of the opposite gender.

Let's teach boys about hormones and how to manage them.

Let's teach boys about what is appropriate, and what is not.

Let's teach boys about feelings, both their own and that of others.

Let's teach body safety to boys and girls as a guard against sexual assault.

Let's start teaching all of these from a young age.

Let's start by removing the shame of talking about our body and what's natural. Only when we do that, do we get to define what is appropriate, and what is not.

Let's start by not giving sex offenders a second chance just because it was their "first offence" or that they "have a bright future ahead".

Let's teach everyone about consent.

Offenders of sexual harassment should be dealt with to the fullest extent of the law so that it is made known that sexual harassment and sexual assault carry heavy penalties. I believe that when we hold people accountable, when we weed out misogyny, and when the law goes down hard on sex offenders, the problem of sexual harassment and assault will sort itself out.

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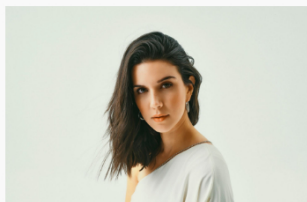
And when we do all of that, we get to create a safer world for our girls.

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