



# Muslim women experiencing the production culture of the Malaysian screen industries

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\* Nur Kareelawati Abd Karim

*Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia*

*kareelawati@usim.edu.my*

Siti Maziah Samsudin

*Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia*

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## ABSTRACT

This article delves into the experiences of Muslim women within the dynamic Malaysian screen industries, focusing on the concept of “production culture” formulated by John T. Caldwell. The study aims to understand how this production culture influences the professional, religious, and gendered identities of female Muslim production workers and to what extent religion serves as a coping mechanism. The research explores the gender disparities and religious ideologies that underpin the Malay community, emphasising the influence of cultural and religious norms. The findings elucidate the challenges Muslim women face in navigating their roles and obligations while highlighting the resilience and career achievements of Muslim women within the Malaysian screen industries. The article concludes with recommendations for future studies and policy development.

**Keywords:** *Production culture, screen industries, Muslim women, gender disparities, Islam*

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1970s shifted the Malaysian economy from an agricultural-based country to an industrial one. Such an economic transformation also brought about structural changes within corporations, shaping the national labour market. Malaysia's thriving labour market has encouraged the participation of women in various industries, including the screen industries. The privatisation of news and entertainment outlets in the 1980s also encouraged Muslim women to take up creative positions behind the scenes as writers, producers, directors, and editors in entertainment media outlets.

The Malaysian screen industries, including television and film, are vibrant and dynamic sectors contributing significantly to the nation's cultural and economic landscape. However, these industries are also marked by distinct power hierarchies and gendered workplace dynamics that often impede the progress of Muslim women aspiring to top positions. This article explores the concept of "production culture" articulated by John T. Caldwell (2008) and examines how it influences the experiences of Muslim women in the screen industries.

John T. Caldwell's "production culture" concept refers to the collective practices, values, and norms that shape the work environment within the screen industries. Caldwell (2008) argues that the production culture encompasses the social dynamics, professional routines, and cultural codes that govern how media content is created and who participates in its production. This concept is crucial for understanding the systemic challenges faced by marginalised groups, including Muslim women, within the Malaysian screen industries. The study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How do female Muslim production workers navigate their professional, religious, and gendered identities within the Malaysian screen production culture? Moreover, 2) to what extent religion can be a coping mechanism for these women?

In doing so, we divide our paper into four key sections: first, it maps related literature on working Muslim women in patriarchal societies, which helps conceptualise the production culture and religious ideology within the screen industries. The second section discusses the social constructivist research design and interview as a method used to gather data for this research. The third section presents the findings, illustrating the Malaysian screen production culture, the Muslim women's experiences of the screen industries, and how religion becomes a coping mechanism adopted by these women. Finally, the fourth section outlines recommendations for future studies and policy development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Working Muslim women in patriarchal societies*

The influence of the patriarchal tradition remains evident in the lives of the Asian populace, particularly among the Malays. This patriarchal system is particularly prominent within the Malay community (Ng et al., 2006). The concept of gender inequality and the dominance of men over women stem from cultural and societal ideologies, as emphasised in Ridgeway's piece on *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (2011). These critiques on gender inequality perpetuate notions that position men as superior to women.

The prolonged existence of gender inequality within the society fosters ongoing discourse on issues like gender disparities and women's roles. Simultaneously, it bestows

men with the privilege of occupying authoritative positions, allowing them to make pivotal decisions in their families, institutions and communities. In Malaysia, issues concerning women are central to ethnic, religious, and class factors. As a multiracial country, Malaysia aspires to rebuild society, mostly along ethnic lines. Cultural and religious norms govern women's image and life in the region (Balraj-Ambigapathy, 2000).

Society's perception of women's roles affects their lives as gendered and careered individuals. Several studies show that religious factors and the surrounding culture determine the role of Muslim women in their communities. According to Suleman et al. (2021), Malaysian women value their families more than their professional accomplishments. This is reflected when they need to choose between their families and careers. In the Malay society, women care for their families and children. Therefore, it is arduous to cope with modern-day changes and challenges relating to societal traditions.

The patriarchal Muslim community's views of women in screen entertainment are often perceived as challenging Malay religio-cultural norms (Abd Karim, 2021; Samsudin et al., 2022). In addition, very few decision-making positions are available for women, especially when these women have family responsibilities. As Ng et al. (2006) argued, the capitalist system has treated Malaysian women as mere objects to attract foreign investors. Although such a statement generally refers to Malaysian female workers, it is relevant to previous studies on Malay-Muslim women, particularly in the screen or film and television industry (Abd Karim, 2021; Samsudin et al., 2022).

Despite the negative societal perception of career women, their participation in the labour force has increased. The number of working women in Malaysia has surged from 43.4% in 2010 to 50.8% in 2020 (International Labour Organisation [ILOSTAT], 2022). The same goes for the number of women in the screen industry, which continues to grow. According to the Professional Film Workers Association of Malaysia (PROFIMA), one-third of its 14,645 registered members are women (Abd Karim, 2021). Nonetheless, government initiatives must still be dedicated to women's career development and well-being behind film and television scenes. This study will likely spark policymakers' interest in contributing to the creative capacity growth strategies currently under the purview of the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) Malaysia (Abd Karim, 2021; Samsudin et al., 2022).

While women's participation in the job market is increasing, they are also expected to be responsible and obedient in retaining Malaysian women's traditional roles and image. Furthermore, the changing economic conditions that allow women to work have resulted in women needing to balance family and work responsibilities. In Islam, a woman's function as a mother and wife is highly honourable and necessary in the family system. However, Muslim women's roles and obligations extend beyond safeguarding the family unit and societal well-being. Other Muslim women in the workforce look up to them as role models. At the same time, Muslim women have made outstanding career achievements and contributions to the country.

Islam allows women to work in any economic activity. Such notions of working wives or mothers in Islam have been challenged by conservative Muslims upholding distorted fundamentalist views (e.g. Taliban), who argue that women should be confined to their homes and denied rights to formal education ("Taliban tells women", 2021). The challenges borne out of the patriarchal culture can be particularly burdensome for women, who often find themselves constrained by a system that designates men as the primary breadwinners while relegating women to household management (Abd Karim, 2021).

In line with these arguments, Haque (2022) asserted that the patriarchal ideologies intertwined with traditional customs and conservative Muslim practices can result in the

suppression and social alienation of women seeking more active roles in their careers. Also, the adoption of patriarchal cultural norms within Malaysian society is identified as a contributing element to the marginalised position of women. Consequently, this phenomenon drives gender disparities within the professional realm (Selamat & Endut, 2020). The same consideration was applied to our research, whereby Malaysia's patriarchal culture and sociocultural and religious contexts matter to the analysis of Muslim women in the screen industries.

### *The production culture*

The concept of "production culture" emphasises the complexity of media organisations, characterised by power dynamics (Caldwell, 2008). It explicates how gender, race, and ideology impact film and television production (Caldwell, 2008). This framework is essential for understanding how Muslim women in Malaysian screen industries navigate their roles within a predominantly male-dominated and ideologically constrained environment. Studies have shown that women in media production face challenges such as long working hours, job dependency on networks, and masculine culture, which indirectly marginalise them (Jansson et al., 2021; O'Brien, 2014).

More studies on production culture in the context of Malaysian screen, film, and television industry are needed, particularly on Muslim women involved in producing film and television content. Previous studies have either focused on the representation of women in Malay melodrama (Ibrahim et al., 2017), the hijab and Malay women in the media (Hassim, 2014), or gender in journalism (International Federation of Journalists, 2015).

Given the limited studies on production culture, we aim to fill in the research gap, mainly about Muslim women working in screen production. To do so, we draw on the concept of production culture applied to researching Islamic television channels in the United Kingdom (Abd Karim, 2015) and Malaysia (Abd Karim & Ahmad, 2018). We emphasise issues of exploitation and self-exploitation among TV production workers.

Another study involved data from Malaysia and the UK, which addressed topics such as the creative autonomy of television production workers (Abd Karim & Ahmad, 2018). The constraints that affect Muslim women's emotional well-being are also relevant to our research, as it allowed us to critically examine how these women negotiate injustice in the screen industries (Abd Karim, 2021).

Literature related to gender and women in media production also lies in the studies of feminist media industries, which discuss how male dominance and masculinity culture indirectly affect media production work. Jansson et al. (2021), Jansson and Wallenberg (2021), and O'Brien (2014) pointed out how women faced such challenges as long working hours, jobs dependent on networks and contacts, and inflexibility, which are all implications of the masculinity culture in media production. Working women face dilemmas contributed by a masculine society, as they lack the flexibility to manage their personal lives and careers. This indirectly forces them to give up and resign (Abd Karim, 2021).

Undoubtedly, fierce intergender competition in the increasingly intense audio-visual industry forces female employees to accept any job offer regardless of their educational background and qualifications, in addition to this industry's environmental and work culture factors, such as long and uncertain working hours (Abd Karim, 2021). Others noted that higher exposure to danger and risk of exploitation (Lee, 2019) as well as difficulties getting promotions (Luckman et al., 2019) are some other challenges women face in the media industry.

Other studies found that the prevailing masculine culture in the creative media industry is a significant factor in women withdrawing. However, as some others have

stated, they did not choose this predicament. Nonetheless, the creative media industry's informal culture and reliance on relationships contribute to the marginalisation of female employees (O'Brien & Liddy, 2020).

Luckman et al. (2019) believed that inequality is frequently due to the scarcity of women in senior positions and decision-makers. This circumstance also contributes to the lack of diversity in the audio-visual industry, which makes the sector dominated by males. The study also mentioned how dominant groups could more readily create rules and marginalise smaller groups, resulting in stereotypes against women and other minorities. The argument also indicates that the best way to measure gender equality in an industry is to look at the position of women workers in the working hierarchy, rather than the number of female workers.

Banks (2009) addressed questions about gender equality (or inequality) in media production. She sought to understand how a particular profession might be socially constructed through gender, particularly concerning those women who work at the lower end of a professional hierarchy in television production. In contrast, D'Acci (1994) focused on "above-the-line" female professionals involved in media production, such as television producers, scriptwriters and network executives. In a study of the television network responsible for producing the long-running television show, *Cagney & Lacey* (1981–1988), she explored how the show offered a "battleground for a negotiation" (Banks, 2009).

Qiao and Lei's (2020) research demonstrated how racial identity can shape the production culture of Hollywood films. Their study focused on John Woo, a prominent Hong Kong auteur director. It examined how his unique style and Chinese cultural heritage, or "Chineseness," were expressed and adapted in his Hollywood films. Their study indicates the intersection of Woo's international filmmaking with his Chinese cultural identity, challenging the traditional limits of national cinema. It also demonstrates how directors of Chinese descent blend elements of Chinese culture into films designed for Western audiences.

Pressures from religious and social groups often influence the screen industries. This pressure can limit creative expression and lead to self-censorship. For instance, the strong influence of religious beliefs in the Pakistani society has created a working environment where filmmakers are hesitant to address sensitive issues that affect Muslim women (Qasim Khan et al., 2024). Filmmakers must navigate around contentious topics involving religion and cultural norms, which often leads to self-censorship. For example, films that address taboo subjects or challenge societal norms, including those related to the experiences of Muslim women, can trigger strong reactions and backlash in the Pakistani society (Qasim Khan et al., 2024).

In the Malaysian screen industries, gendered workplace dynamics are deeply ingrained. Despite the increasing participation of women in various roles, the higher echelons of these industries remain predominantly male-dominated (Abd Karim, 2021). This disparity is rooted in longstanding cultural and societal norms that prioritise male leadership and often view women, especially Muslim women, through a lens of traditional gender roles.

### *Conceptualising religious ideology in the screen labour studies*

As an ideology and belief system, Islam profoundly influences Muslim women's roles and societal expectations. Traditional patriarchal norms continue to shape Muslim women's roles, primarily as spouses and mothers, subsequently affecting their professional lives (Alatas, 2023). In this article, we argue that Islam, as a religious ideology, can shape the production culture and impact the working life of Muslim women in the screen industries.

Subsequently, it is used as a coping mechanism for Muslim women experiencing the production culture of the Malaysian screen industries.

Research into creative labour in the United Kingdom (UK) has shown that gender and religious ideology are central to Muslim women's experience in the screen industries (Abd Karim, 2015). The study discovered that the production culture of an Islamic television channel nurtured the "culture of caution" among its production workers. Creative decisions among female Muslims involved in talk show production as researchers, directors, screenwriters, and hosts were often constrained by religious ideology. The pressure to appear as "moderate Muslims," to a certain extent, compromised the production quality of the talk shows (Abd Karim, 2015). Although such research was conducted in a Muslim-minority cultural context, Malay-Muslim female workers experienced almost similar problems to their British counterparts. These issues often concern Islamic conservatism vs moderate, gendered and professional identities impeding creative autonomy (Abd Karim, 2021).

The religious notion of *good work* is set by religio-cultural norms that doing a "good job" for its own sake has a positive moral value as a service to God (Schaltegger & Torgler, 2010, p. 99). Weber (2001) argued that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination acknowledges that people need to seek "evidence" to prove that they are among the "elect" (God's chosen). Meanwhile, in Islam, good work describes the Muslim motivation for self-exploitation or being overworked in religious television but guided by the Quran and Sunnah (Abd Karim, 2015; Abd Karim & Ahmad, 2018). Such a motivation is based upon the Qur'an, the Muslim scriptural source that address the promise of such "deferred reward" for doing good work:

*Whoever does righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily, to him. We will give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions*

(Qur'an 16:97, translated by Yusuf Ali, 2011. p. 663)

Such an example demonstrates how a religious calling (Islamic *Da'awah*) and the promise of "deferred reward" in the afterlife might encourage workers to self-exploit. Women, mainly, are vulnerable to self-exploitation and being exploited by the media organisations that hire them (Abd Karim, 2015, 2019). Apart from aiming to go to heaven, embracing such concepts as work as *ibadah* (worship), *sabr* (patience), and *qana'ah* (contentment) also results in self-exploitation, without them noticing it (or failure to acknowledge). Because Muslim women may have been exposed to different professional experiences, we also explored what motivates them to continue pursuing their careers in the screen industries.

## METHODS

Like Caldwell (2008), this study drew on a social constructivism research design. The aim is to answer two research questions: 1) How do female Muslim production workers navigate their professional, religious, and gendered identities within the Malaysian screen production culture? Moreover, 2) to what extent religion can be a coping mechanism for these women? We conducted interviews with 20 Malay women from Malaysia's screen industry. The informants were selected through the research network or friends of friends utilising the snowball sampling approach. This sampling technique was chosen to help obtain informants with specific characteristics based on the problems addressed by the

study (Silverman, 2014). The interviews captured the experiences of women at all stages of their careers.

Table 1 presents the profile of the informants in our research project whom we directly quoted in this article. Although the study involved a small number of participants, the information gathered is significant for a better understanding of issues faced by Muslim women in the screen industry. Especially, when there is a limited number of studies on this area.

**Table 1.** Participants' profiles

| Pseudonym | Age | Marital Status | Work Role             | Years of Experience |
|-----------|-----|----------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Hidayah   | 50  | Single mother  | Executive producer    | 25                  |
| Hafizah   | 45  | Single mother  | Senior producer       | 23                  |
| Nurul     | 27  | Single         | Producer              | 4                   |
| Farhana   | 28  | Single         | Producer              | 4                   |
| Farah     | 39  | Married        | Producer              | 11                  |
| Maria     | 48  | Married        | Producer              | 26                  |
| Aminah    | 50  | Married        | Editor                | 26                  |
| Huda      | 63  | Married        | Editor                | 45                  |
| Alia      | 27  | Married        | Editor                | 4                   |
| Hana      | 41  | Married        | Makeup artist         | 18                  |
| Azizah    | 35  | Married        | Camera operator       | 11                  |
| Diana     | 59  | Married        | Makeup artist         | 35                  |
| Fadilah   | 31  | Married        | Makeup artist         | 10                  |
| Hanis     | 41  | Married        | Makeup artist/costume | 10                  |
| Zeti      | 58  | Married        | Production manager    | 14                  |
| Zahra     | 52  | Married        | Scriptwriter          | 25                  |
| Sarah     | 42  | Married        | Assistant director    | 19                  |
| Siti      | 59  | Married        | Production manager    | 43                  |
| Adilah    | 51  | Single mother  | Line producer         | 20                  |
| Salina    | 40  | Married        | Actress               | 17                  |

The interview sessions were conducted via online platform and phone calls, and each took about 30 minutes to an hour. The questions were open-ended, allowing the informants to express themselves freely. We chose semi-structured interview as a method of data collection because it allowed us to elicit any underlying meaning (Silverman, 2014). Moreover, interview has been a useful method in studies examining production culture (Abd Karim, 2015; Caldwell, 2008).

To protect the informants' privacy, we concealed their names by using pseudonyms. We only cite their work roles for identification when reporting the findings. Table 1 illustrates the age and experience of the workers we interviewed. These informants are aged between 27 and 63 years old. They included production producer, presentation editor, assistant director, scriptwriter, makeup artist, wardrobe manager, and actress. Fifteen were married, two were single, and three were single mothers. The informants comprised Malay Muslim women who worked in government, private media companies, or are freelancers.

Informants also filled out a consent form, which indicates their agreement to be interviewed. They were allowed to withdraw their consent at any point during data collection. They were also made aware that their feedback will be published in a journal.

We employed a thematic analysis to process the data gathered from the interviews. We analysed the themes that emerged from the literature review and interviews to finalise them. They will be discussed in the following section.

## FINDINGS

### *Experiencing the production culture*

Informants highlighted that working in the screen industry is suitable for Muslim women if they maintain modesty and uphold Islamic values. They viewed the industry's production culture as a potential platform for Islamic *Da'wah* (spiritual calling). Thus, allowing them to promote positive Islamic images and values. As one informant explained:

*This (screen) entertainment industry is appropriate for women, particularly Muslims. However, it needs to be conveyed modestly and appropriately. It can be the predestined platform for them to spread da'wah (Calling), good messages, and valuable information to others.*  
(Nurul, producer)

Another producer expressed how she navigates her professional roles and religious identity, which might help promote a positive Islamic image, especially to young people in the industry.

*Working in the entertainment industry is not an issue for Muslim women. Just keep on being modest. The advent of Islamic entertainment programs can indirectly attract the attention of young people. It will also positively impact society and provide colour to the entertainment sector.*  
(Farhana, production producer)

Meanwhile, a freelance producer, Farah, remarked that the suitability of working in such an industry might also be influenced by the family and spouse's acceptance of the industry's cultural norms, such as long working hours. As a result, her family's understanding is vital for her career advancement as it forgoes traditional working hours.

*The nature of the project determines it. Working time is still determined if you work in a series of drama productions with a deadline. You probably will not have an issue if you are single. Of course, parents will be surprised because you have to come home late, work overtime till morning, and work on weekends. So, it is entirely up to the individual. For my part, I will explain my job to my parents. So, eventually, they will understand. Since the beginning of our relationship, my spouse has known about my profession, so there is no issue.*  
(Farah, producer)

Unlike a producer, Fadilah, a makeup artist, experienced gender competitiveness. She shared her perspective on gender discrimination.

*Male makeup artists dominate drama and film production. Drama filming usually takes months, so male makeup artists are preferred because they do not have responsibilities like women with families.*  
(Fadilah, makeup artist)

Another makeup artist found that married Muslim women in the entertainment industry are often frowned upon by members of the Malay society. They consider the future of those who work in the screen industry insecure.

*Sometimes, people look down on us who work behind the scenes. People would say, “You are out of there, leaving your husband alone at home.” They think I am very liberal. Like makeup artists or other crews, they usually say we have no future [in the industry].*  
(Hanis, makeup artist)

Women’s participation in media work in Malaysia may have brought diversity to the screen industry. Despite their determination to work, they too cannot avoid certain stigmas, for example, women in the screen industry often mingle with those who do not observe their religious practices. Those who do not perform prayers or do not wear *hijab* are always judged by some Muslim quarters as upholding a liberal view. Being an unmarried, single mother, or married woman is also challenging in a patriarchal culture like Malaysia. The finding corroborates with Ng et al.’s (2014) argument regarding the status of women in the Malay society—how women are often the object of societal critique.

### *Institutional racism and gender inequality*

Our findings expound how the informants’ micro-individual identity (race and its intersection with religious beliefs) shapes career advancement. For example, Azizah, who works in a private media organisation owned by non-Muslims, stated that the employers’ treatment and promotion opportunities might differ based on religious beliefs and race, regardless of gender.

*Depending on the supervisors’ religion and race on duty, there are differences in treatment regarding assignment and trust to perform essential tasks. Opportunities for “special tasks” [complex tasks] are limited to Malay Muslim women workers. At the same time, promotion opportunities are based on race, not individual merit.*  
(Azizah, editor)

Another informant who works in a company owned by a non-Muslim commented that the employees’ opportunities for promotion are usually subject to the employers’ discretion. However, both informants admitted that they did not experience any form of gender discrimination.

*Promotion is based on who our supervisor is, and the way of assessment is different. It depends on the employer’s perspective; some choose by race and meet the quota regardless of gender and the employee’s ability to work with the employer. So far, we have been treated equally despite gender differences.*  
(Aminah, editor)

Meanwhile, the situation differs for those working in state-controlled entertainment media. They are not subjected to gender or racial prejudice. Furthermore, promotion opportunities are based on merit. As a result, women outnumber males in top positions.

*There is no difference in treatment because seven of the top 10 positions in my workplace are occupied by women. Despite work in this field, women are one step ahead of men. Your annual work target score determines your success.*

*You will be recognised with high honours and the employee excellence award if your job is outstanding. Both men and women can advance in their careers. It is based on merit, not on gender or race.*  
(Farhana, producer)

Hafizah, a senior producer who works in a Malay-owned private media organisation, also stated that although they were treated equally, those who work under non-Malay-owned media companies may face different situations.

*It depends on the organisation. My previous company is a Malay-owned company. So there is no problem. The promotion opportunity and treatment are equal. Promotion is based on individual merits or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). So if it reaches the target, then you will be promoted. However, if you work in a non-Malay-owned company, there may be a difference in treatment.*  
(Hafizah, senior producer)

Nonetheless, discrimination against female employees still exist, although most of the female employees interviewed did not express it. According to Hidayah, an executive producer, although working in a Malay-owned private media organisation, she faced discrimination from male co-workers. The same goes for Farah, a production manager who often needed to compete with her male co-workers.

*Sometimes, some people look at us as women and say, "It is women. What can they do?"*  
(Hidayah, executive producer)

*Most of the Malaysian film and drama production workers are men. For example, if the director is a man, so the assistant director must be male, and they will bring their partner (male) or cronies to work together.*  
(Farah, production manager)

Another production manager also contended that many female employees are traumatised by sexual harassment.

*Some quit their jobs. If they are married, their husbands would forbid them from working. If they are single mothers, they will find a way to transfer into another field. They are afraid of coming across the perpetrators again. They do not dare to file a police report out of shame. That is why this sexual harassment is rampant.*  
(Siti, production manager)

These informants' remarks demonstrate the prevalence of institutional racism in the media organisations owned by non-Malays. This situation does not occur in government-owned media organisations because promotions are based on individual KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Thus, it cannot be denied that organisational discrimination and racism persist.

### ***Precarious labour conditions***

Several informants provided examples of the obstacles and difficulties they faced. They spoke about the unclear future and employment insecurity, which caused them anxiety. They must also deal with the reality of life, even if they enjoy their work. As, acceptance and support from parents is crucial to them, many had to resign due to parental pressure.

*Not all personnel who begin their careers in broadcasting remain in the industry. Many of them quit because of the long working hours and switched fields. I lost several young staff because they received regular employment offers in different sectors. Every job has its own set of difficulties. This broadcasting profession is challenging because it differs from a typical 9 am to 5 pm job. Despite the passion, family demands, and pressures can play a part. It is also because employment in this business relies heavily on short-term projects.*

(Salina, producer)

Another element of precariousness experienced by the informants is poor remuneration. The informal nature of creative labour exposes creative workers to career and life instability, such as low payment. A freelancer, Sarah, said that, despite standard compensation rates, payments are still inconsistent and low.

*Sometimes, they contact me complaining that the budget is tight and offer a salary that needs to be commensurate with the old price rate. The crew salary has a standard rate, but it is unjustified when they want to reduce it.*

(Sarah, assistant director)

Some experience low wages and job insecurity, such as not getting paid soon after completing their jobs. Alia claimed that as a freelance editor, she often works alone and thus, is vulnerable to being conned by production companies.

*Working alone is quite challenging for me. Because someone did not pay me, that is a common thing. The reason is that there needs to be a budget. Even if there is a legal contract, some people still have yet to get paid.*

(Alia, editor)

In summary, the majority of work in the entertainment sector is in the secondary market, which is defined by “jobs” or “gigs” that are frequently informal or contract-based (flexible). Unfortunately, this market offers few opportunities for advancement or skill development, inadequate or non-existent industrial relations frameworks, and excessive turnover (Caldwell, 2008). Thus, creative workers face career and life instability due to the informal nature of the creative industry.

### ***Religion as a coping mechanism***

Women in the screen industry frequently consider quitting their careers. On the one hand, they must meet the expectations of their organisation. On the other, they also need to work hard to fulfill their family obligations. Despite the ongoing debate and criticism from conservative quarters regarding the entertainment industries, our study demonstrates that most participants regard their daily employment as an act of worship or *ibadah*. They believe they are accountable for presenting knowledge in an audio-visual format that conforms to the Malay community’s cultural and religious values.

*Our role is to convey information while also editing and selecting visuals. We also edit materials before they are submitted for publication. The information must be truthful and have no aspects of defamation. For example, I must edit the footage of Muslim women and men to cover their Aurah (modesty) because they will be broadcast on television.*

(Nurul, producer)

Meanwhile, they also regard religion as source of strength to cope with everyday challenges. Although a career in this industry is challenging, they are still grateful because they can earn a *halal* (lawful) income.

*Islam teaches us that earning a living is part of ibadah. Furthermore, we seek halal (permissible) living for our family, parents, and siblings. Therefore, if you work hard, you will succeed. I am grateful that I have a job because it is challenging to find one. Moreover, the work, in turn, is in line with my qualifications and passion.*

(Salina, production producer)

Meanwhile, Aminah viewed her patience as a coping method in dealing with work precarity, such as low income. In addition, she regarded patience (*sabr*) as her motivator for staying in this field for about 26 years.

*Editing a film took a lot of time. I received little payment in the past, and there was no demand like now. So I accept the payment.*

(Aminah, editor)

Even if there is a work contract, payment issues still occur. According to some of the informants, as the Malaysian entertainment industry is small, many choose to remain silent about their problems for fear of repercussions. As Sarah put it:

*Even if a contract exists, going to court while filming will be inconvenient. It will interfere with the producer's duties and timetable. I should keep quiet because the industry in Malaysia is small. If you do something awful, you will encounter the same person again in the future.*

(Sarah, assistant director)

Islamic conceptions such as patience (*sabr*) and contentment (*qana'ah*) shown by female informants are often used to cope with precarity in career and life. Nevertheless, they should be also aware that they will continue to experience instabilities and exploitation in their career if they decide to persist with this approach.

### ***Coping with motherhood and (un)married life***

Regardless of their work role, some informants believed they could carry out their responsibilities excellently if there was cohesive support. For example, Hafizah, a senior producer, said that before becoming a single mom, her spouse would help her care for their children. However, after losing her husband, the day care centre and her family-in-law became her central support systems.

*After becoming a single mom, I will get help from day care or my in-laws. So if the filming ends late, I will extend the hours in the day care or send my children to my in-laws' house.*

(Hafizah, senior producer)

Another informant said that technological advancements helped her monitor her children, despite her busy schedule.

*Now that technology has advanced, I can keep track of them. I can video call my children to say hello if I am not at home. When children reach adulthood, they can take care of themselves. So I do not need to worry.*

(Farah, production producer)

These findings align with O'Brien and Liddy's (2020) argument that when a woman's sole duty for raising children is placed on her, her work life tends to be affected. As a result, it is easier for women, particularly single moms, to cope with their responsibilities as mothers with a strong support system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Future research*

Future studies should delve deeper into the concept of "production culture" within the Malaysian screen industries. This involves examining the power dynamics, professional routines, and cultural codes that shape the work environment. Such research will help to understand better how gender, race, and ideology impact film and television production, particularly for Muslim women who navigate a predominantly male-dominated and ideologically constrained environment.

More qualitative and quantitative research is needed to document the experiences of Muslim women in media production. In particular, the intersectionality of religion, media, and cultural practices, focusing on how Islamic principles and local traditions influence the participation and advancement of Muslim women in media production. This will help us understand the nuanced landscape these women navigate and the dual impact of religion and culture on their careers.

Comparative studies between the Malaysian screen industries and those in other countries, particularly in Islamic contexts, can reveal unique challenges and strategies used by Muslim women globally. This allows a broader perspective and identification of best practices that can be adapted to the Malaysian context.

### *Policy development*

Implementing policies that specifically aim to reduce gender disparities in the media production industry may create more opportunities for women in decision-making positions and address issues such as gender pay gaps and precarious labour conditions. The development of comprehensive support systems for women in media production, such as affordable childcare services and flexible working hours, can help women balance their professional and personal responsibilities. This will particularly benefit single mothers.

Cultural sensitivity and gender equality training programmes within media organisations are encouraged to educate employees about the importance of respecting religious and cultural contexts while promoting an inclusive and equitable work environment. These policy initiatives may strengthen regulatory frameworks to protect women from exploitation and discrimination in the workplace. Subsequently, it may encourage media organisations to adopt policies that promote work-life balance, such as telecommuting options and flexible schedules. By addressing these research gaps and implementing targeted policies, a more inclusive and equitable media production industry that supports the participation and advancement of Muslim women in Malaysia can be fostered.

## CONCLUSION

Applying Caldwell's (2008) production culture concept reveals how Malaysian women negotiate their identities and cope with industry challenges in the Malaysian screen industries. Their experiences highlight the intersection of gender, religion, and professional

identity within the media production context. While Islam encourages ethical work and can justify women's professional involvement, traditional cultural norms and patriarchal structures often constrain their participation and advancement.

The Malay community's cultural practices, influenced by both Islamic and local traditions, create a nuanced landscape for Muslim women in media. The Malay concept of *adat* (customary practices) often overlaps with Islamic principles, sometimes reinforcing restrictive gender roles but also providing a framework for women's participation in media that aligns with community values.

Moreover, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and ideological dynamics at play by exploring the production culture of the Malaysian screen industries through the lens of Muslim women. It calls for further research and policy initiatives to address gender disparities and support the inclusion of women in media production. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced approach that respects religious and cultural contexts while promoting gender equality.

Applying the production culture critique to this study allows us to see the folds or hidden behind-the-scenes experiences beyond academia. This article may open up future opportunities to explore further in different cultural and media production settings. Subsequently, it provides policymakers and academics alike with a broader understanding of the challenges women face in general and women who work in the screen industries in particular.

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**Nur Kareelawati Abd Karim (Dr)**

is an associate professor of communication at the Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. She has a PhD in Communication and Media Studies from the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. Her research interests include media production analysis, creative industries and cultural policy.

**Siti Maziah Samsudin**

has a Master in Social Science from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. She specialises in cultural studies and the sociology of work. Her research interests include the intersection of women, Islam and creative and cultural industries.

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