

# Malaysia: Creeping up of a new norm: Gender segregation

Friday 9 October 2020, by [ISA Rozana](#) (Date first published: 14 September 2020).

**When it was reported on July 14 this year that PAS commissioner Rosli Abdul Jabbar proposed that Pahang follows Terengganu in implementing gender segregation in cinemas, I wasn't surprised, but I felt a little bit alarmed.**

We should not kid ourselves; we should know PAS well enough by now – their call to implement gender segregation in public spaces is one that they will continuously pursue. And how very convenient that the social distancing SOPs that are critical to Covid-19 prevention can be used to further the cause of moral policing!

This isn't the first time that PAS had taken this action. In 1995, gender segregation in cinemas was implemented by the state government in Kelantan and during the screenings, lights must also be switched on.

There are no cinemas in Kelantan anymore.

A friend there lamented that when her grandchildren want to watch new movies, she would have to plan for a trip to Terengganu to do so.

In 2018, the PAS state government in Terengganu issued a guideline which, among others, requires gender segregation to be imposed not only for the audiences but for performers as well.

In the latest development, on Sept 4, 2020, it was reported that the TGV Mesra Mall in Kemaman is implementing gender segregation in their cinema there following a ruling by the Kemaman Municipal Council to be enforced from Sept 3, 2020.

TGV also stated on their Facebook page that married couples would have to show their marriage certificates or other documented evidence.

Initially, there was also a reminder on dress codes for Muslims and non-Muslims and not to bring alcohol into the cinemas but since then, this has been removed.

There were over 2,700 comments on that TGV posting announcing the gender segregation policy. The reactions varied, ranging from support for such seating arrangements to outright opposition.

Accusations and names were also thrown at one another. The continuous (and familiar) refrain from those who support it is that this is only for Muslims, so non-Muslims don't have to worry about it.

To add to that, this is only imposed in TGV Kemaman, so outsiders don't have to kick up a fuss.

While such a policy is meant for Muslims only, the effects of the policy, and its implementation, deepen the divide that already exists among us. We are already divided politically and divided too in

terms of ethnicity.

Aside from the workplace, social and public spaces are where family and friends of all different ages, relations and backgrounds come together and be with one another to enjoy common interests in entertainment and relaxation.

We already have to deal with Covid-19 and the limited ways with which we conduct ourselves and be with one another with social distancing. And there is already an SOP for people to be seated separately in cinemas. So why this move?

Implementing gender segregation now is opportunistic as it is a form of moral policing at a time when people are more likely to conform, rather than resist.

With the recovery movement control order still in place, this would be easier to impose on to the public because there are already very few spaces and platforms for resistance. Social distancing and gender segregation would then be the new norm.

PAS regards gender segregation as part of the Islamic principle to counsel the prevention of activities that may lead to harm.

Even though it is targeted towards Muslims only, for now, this religious principle is being implemented through rulings and by-laws of a municipal council, not a religious authority.

Gender segregation is already being normalised in religious spaces, but now it is being done in places of entertainment owned by a business entity and administered by the local government.

Some may argue that imposing Islamic principles on legal entities is nothing new, i.e. we have Islamic banking, we have restaurants that require halal certification. But that is a conscious decision and effort to provide specific services and facilities that comply with Islamic principles and still offers the choice to Muslims and non-Muslims if they want to have those services and facilities and eat at those places.

Going to the cinema and watching films is for entertainment and fun. I guess the choice now would be for families and friends to stay home and watch online/downloaded films together, or catch it on Netflix, or one of such outlets, if they don't want to comply with this new ruling.

It'll be a matter of time then that cinemas will also dwindle in business, as they did in Kelantan.

Some may ask, is it so objectionable to practice gender segregation?

After all, there are separate coaches on light rail transits and these are done for the benefit of women so that they wouldn't be harassed physically or sexually in such spaces. It could be argued that women being harassed in this way is a form of violence against women and therefore, they should be protected from harm and should be given the space where they feel safe.

However, separate coaches are only a temporary measure in a specific space for a specific time/journey. It doesn't address the root problem of why women are violated in the first place. In the long run, without addressing the fundamental causes, there is only one solution to be proffered - which is to add more coaches for women. And by the way, once a woman steps out of the coach, she is still vulnerable to being violated in other spaces.

Likewise, gender segregation in cinemas doesn't solve the larger problem of, for example, pre-marital sex or teenage pregnancies, in the long-run, if that is the concern. It is merely a cosmetic

display of enjoining good and forbidding evil, of imposing religious principles in form over substance.

Living in the time of the coronavirus pandemic makes it harder for us to raise our objections against such policies and rulings – but if we don't raise our concerns now, then be prepared to live in a Malaysia that thrives on continuous moral policing as a way of life.

---

**Rozana Isa** is the Executive Director of Sisters in Islam.

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.*

---

**P.S.**

Malaysiakini

<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/542541>