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GOOD MOTHERS, BAD MOTHERS: Motherhood, modernity and politics in representations of child abuse in Malaysia's English-language newspapers

Sara Niner, Denise Cuthbert and Yarina Ahmad

This paper reports on an analysis of representations of child abuse in English-language newspapers in Malaysia. Certain media images of mothers recur: bad mothers who are unable to protect their children; and good mothers, who are feminine representatives of a maternalised national government which is charged with interceding on behalf of abused children. Mothers implicated in child abuse are harshly judged by the maternalist regime. Our findings resonate with previous feminist analyses of child abuse but manifest differently in a non-Western, non-Christian context. In Malaysia, motherhood plays a crucial role in nationalist political culture; women and mothers carry increasing economic, social and political burdens in the rapidly modernising state. Fathers are largely marginal or absent in media reporting of child abuse, while mothers are represented as fully responsible for the care of children, particularly when problems occur. The media's blaming of child abuse on social changes while valorising traditional families reflects a conservative, patriarchal perspective, occluding discussion of the contexts of child abuse and thus mitigating against comprehensive solutions.

KEYWORDS motherhood; child abuse; Malaysia; English-language newspapers; representation; family

Introduction

This article presents findings from an analysis of media representations of child abuse in the English-language news media in Malaysia. Our particular focus rests on the maternal figures that recur throughout news reportage of this issue. Drawing on feminist analysis, we argue that news reporting of child abuse habitually implicates those bad mothers whose protection ought to have prevented the abuse of their children. Such reporting, we suggest, offers little by way of context to explain why some mothers may abuse or neglect their children or leave them in the care of others who do. The counterpoint to the bad mother is the good mother who is the maternal representative of a benevolent national government. Such good mothers rescue abused children and, on occasion, judge and rehabilitate wayward mothers. As such, media discourses on child abuse offer insights into public views and anxieties around modern Malaysian motherhood.

While some aspects of the representation of women in the Malaysian press concerning motherhood, child welfare and modernisation resonate with feminist analysis in the US and the UK where much of the research to date has been undertaken, some features are specific to the social and cultural context of modernising Islamic Malaysia. While Malaysia is not an Islamic state, Islam is the official religion of ethnic Malays. Child abuse is a deeply political and controversial topic which highlights competing views about how modern Muslims should live. The issue of child abuse, as reported in the Malaysian press, throws light on the situation for modern Malaysian women, particularly mothers, who are under pressure to manage an increasing range of responsibilities, including blending both traditional and modern practices

in their post-modern families. Although feminist media analysis has yet to make a significant impact on scholarship outside the West, we are of the view that such analysis may provide a helpful starting point for examining news representations of mothers in Malaysia.

Background: Contemporary Motherhood

Motherhood is central to the differentiation of gender across cultures and “[e]ven for theorists who have thrown into doubt other bases for sexual difference, the claims of the reproductive body retain their capacity to provide a lodging place for a ‘notion’ of woman” (Kalpana Ram 1998, 281). Further, women are judged against each other—with combinations of suspicion, pity, or contempt directed to the non-mother as “selfish” or “inauthentic” (Margarete Sandelowski 1990a, 1990b). However, mothers are also subject to moral assessment and ranked accordingly (Denise Cuthbert, Kate Murphy, and Marian Quartly 2009). This study investigates particular instances of this type of judgement related to mother blame in media representations of child abuse.

Feminist scholarship on contemporary motherhood highlights its global diversity and fragmentation linked to dramatic social, economic, and political changes over the last few decades. In the Asian region this has resulted in a “post-modernisation . . . of feeling around mothering . . . marked by increasing fluidity and instability” (Maila Stivens 2007, 32). Feminist scholars illuminate the pressures on women in modernising Asia where new burdens are layered on non-negotiable expectation of exemplary motherhood (Theresa Devesahayam and Brenda S. Yeoh 2007, 21).

Motherhood in Malaysia

Historically, Malays were criticised by the colonial British for spoiling their children and characterised as “indulgent, loving and nurturant” (Maila Stivens 1998b, 57–58). In 1970s post-colonial Malaysia, “native” parenting, supported by an extended family, was superseded by an increasingly nuclearised urban family. By the 1990s, these changes produced “a modified and often female-centred extended family form to support the work and family trajectories of urban life.” A dominant state-level ideology assumed that the desirable Asian family was an extended one with an entrenched ideology of familism (Maila Stivens 1998a, 103–104).

More recently, the Malaysian government has encouraged the formation of a modern version of Islam which supports families facing the moral challenges of development: “Westoxification, collapsing family values and general social decline” (Stivens 1998b, 71). Resurgent Islam and the insistence on Asian “Family Values” have politicised the domestic sphere. With negligible welfare provision, families are subject to authoritarian government campaigns to adopt such values and punitive responses when families—especially mothers—fail. Campaigns are linked to international coalitions against homosexuality, liberalism, and feminism (Maila Stivens 2006, 357–362).

In societies where traditional gender roles represent barriers to modernisation, women are often given responsibility for reform while being expected to remain the “heartland of tradition” and avoiding personal or sexual emancipation (Ram 1998, 294). In Malaysia, a preoccupation is noted with women’s “modesty, chastity and sexuality” and role as “bearers of correct religious dress and behaviour and as keepers of a hopefully revived ‘family’” (Stivens 1998b, 113; 1998a, 106–107). Modern Islamic frameworks offer women a way to combine new, complex, and conflicting demands (Stivens 2006, 358).

Women's modern responsibilities include domestic, public, and productive duties or woman's "triple burden" (cf. Caroline Moser 1993). In Malaysia these duties include raising "nation-building" children, upholding modern Islamic family values, and economic development of the nation, through efficient domestic management and undertaking paid employment (Stivens 1998a, 109–113). Rapid development such as that taking place in Malaysia since the 1970s has placed considerable burdens on women, who have been described as national "shock absorbers" in similar processes of neo-liberalisation and globalisation elsewhere (WHO 2012).

Representation of Child Abuse and the Media

Throughout history children have been mistreated and subjected to violence but calling this "abuse" rather than punishment, discipline, or cruelty, is recent. An early use of this term was made by Kempe over fifty years ago (C. Henry Kempe, Frederic N. Silverman, Brandt F. Steele, William Droegemueller, and Henry K. Silver 1962). Kempe's work raised community concern around child abuse, resulting in increased reporting of its occurrence and, concomitantly, growth in media coverage which has helped to shape government responses (Philip Mendes 2000, 50, 52; Dorothy Scott and Shurlee Swain 2002; Martha Shirk 1997). Research examining media coverage has been primarily concerned with Western societies and few scholarly studies have been undertaken in Malaysia (Mohd Sham Kasim 2001, 142).

Constructing news is a "highly interpretive and value-laden process" based on "socially created collective universals and traditional understandings" that often represent and reinforce stereotypes (Roya Akhavan-Majid and Jyotika Ramaprasad 1998, 133). The framing of news stories is never value neutral and largely reflects the ideology of the larger socio-political system (Rebecca de Souza 2010, 78–79). However, the media do not just reflect prevailing attitudes and values, but also produce them (Cathy Ferrand Bullock 2007).

In general, the most common type of news media article focuses on facts and lacks context and is classified as "episodic" framing (Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder 1991, 2). Typical crime stories in the press present both victim and perpetrator as individuals. The broader responsibilities of government, policy, or society are rarely considered. In contrast, feature or "thematically" framed articles tend to present issues in a more complex manner and mention, even critique, policies and solutions (David Gough 1996). In Malaysia, as internationally, media coverage exposing specific cases of extreme child abuse has provoked public outrage driving policy and legislative changes for the better protection of children (Shirk 1997). However, the media are often criticised for sensationalising individual, unrepresentative cases and for failing to consider socioeconomic context. Exceptional manifestations such as "lurid child sexual abuse" and murder are emphasised rather than the chronic forms of neglect or emotional abuse (Patrick Ayre 2001). These representations can over-sensitise readers to particular risks and foster moral panic (Ayre 2001, 889; Mendes 2000, 54). Abuse within the family is also consistently under-represented while non-familial abuse is over-represented in relation to their actual instances, producing scapegoats of "strangers" (Carole Smart 1989). Scrutiny of the family is thus deflected, which supports a socially conservative political agenda. Instead, child abuse is blamed on social changes such as "divorce, homosexuality, sex education, abortion, and working mothers" (Philip Mendes 2000, 52–53; 2001, 29). Child welfare professionals and academics have advised the media to report instead on the underlying causes of child abuse and neglect (J. Kitzinger 1996). The relevance of this analysis to Malaysia's conservative "Family Values" campaigns and the abandonment of neonates will be discussed later in this paper. Conservative approaches achieve a low-cost, narrowly punitive child protection system, which avoids the more

complex task of investigating the deeper causes of abuse and appropriate reform (Mendes 2001, 29).

Feminist Media Analysis: Violence, Child Abuse and Mothers

Feminists have actively used the media for creating public awareness and shaping attitudes towards social problems such as child abuse, domestic violence, and rape. Feminist media analysis focussing on issues of violence against women identifies episodic framing as obscuring issues of unequal gender power relations and reinforcing a conservative “patriarchal status quo” (Bullock 2007, 40; Smart 1989). Elizabeth K. Carll’s (2005) study of rape coverage found that articles supplied fewer details than those about murder or assault, reinforcing ideas that “violence [against women] was an isolated ideology or deviance” denying the “social roots” of gender violence and absolving society from responsibility (2005, 145).

Feminists also identify the under-representation of familial abuse in the media, protecting fathers’ rights and patriarchal family structures (Chris Goddard and Bernadette J. Saunders 2000). The feminist reframing of child abuse from the 1970s onwards has identified a distorted media focus on the abduction, sexual abuse, and murder of children by strangers, thus representing child sexual abuse as an external pathology, when the greatest danger to children were the “ordinary” men they already knew. If child sexual abuse is largely depicted as an external threat then men within the home will be seen as less likely to engage in such actions (Smart 1989). Another strategy that shifts attention and responsibility away from male abusers is to blame mothers who fail to protect their children. This is a recurrent moral theme in child welfare and abuse discourses from the nineteenth century to the present (Carole-Anne Hooper 1992; Smart 1989). Child protection regimes have historically policed mothers, actions which further protect patriarchal interests. Like the focus on the role and behaviour of the female victim in media reportage of rape, a distorted emphasis on mothers in child abuse reportage reflects “cultural myths and patriarchal assumptions about the proper role and behaviour of women” (Carll 2005, 145). For women who engage in sexual relationships with men other than the father of the abused children, the judgement is harsher; a good mother should never put her own needs above the welfare of her children. Within these broad feminist media critiques, ongoing challenges surround how to account for mothers who are the actual perpetrators of abuse.

Child Abuse in Malaysia

Following Kempe, doctors at Kuala Lumpur Hospital documented the emergence of child abuse in Malaysia (Woon Tai Hwang, Carmel Chin, and Lam Khuan Leng 1974). Since then, child abuse has become a growing public health and policy issue, against a backdrop of marked social and political change. The Malaysian public first became aware of child abuse at the time of the tragic abuse and death of “Baby” Balasundaram in 1990. This case highlights the initial role that the media played in garnering public attention around the issue of child abuse. New government policies followed (Jamilah Ariffin 1995, 367; Kasim 2001). Official statistics suggest that instances of child abuse in Malaysia continue to rise annually. In 1981, the State Social Welfare Department recorded ninety-three reported cases of child abuse. By 1991 the number of cases had risen to 970 (Ariffin 1995, 355) and by 2007 they had increased to 1,999. The most recent Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia (2011) statistics recorded a total of 3,047 cases. These statistics reveal that approximately two thirds of child abuse victims are female. Reported cases are indicative and likely to represent only 10 percent of actual cases, as most victims and their families remain too ashamed or otherwise unable to report violations (UNICEF 2009). The Universal Periodic Review, which

examines human rights in UN member states, noted in 2009 a concern about the persistence in Malaysia of “patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes” and “problems faced by the girl child” (Child Rights Information Network 2011). Additionally, the report states that “violence against children in the family remained a serious problem.

Owing to strong taboos, victims and witnesses rarely reported these cases.” Legal corporal punishment was also criticised (Child Rights Information Network 2011). Child abuse is the result of a complex combination of personal, cultural, and social factors (Carol Djeddah, Paola Facchin, Cristina Ranzato, and Claude Romer 2000, 909). Higher rates are reported during times of social transition and conflict. Studies also show that sexual abuse is five to seven times higher for girls than boys, while physical abuse is twice as common for boys. The WHO (2011) claims that “rigid gender roles, including definitions of masculinity linked with dominance and hierarchical gender relations” are linked to these disparities.

Method

Malaysia’s two English-language newspapers, The Star (hereafter TS) and the New Straits Times (hereafter NST) were monitored for coverage of child abuse cases throughout 2010. English is used across the three main ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—and allows access to a wider multi-ethnic national audience but may also favour a “middle-class” population (Stivens 1998b, 100). The choice of a single year represents a “particular historical moment” with which to examine a discourse (Zoe Anderson 2012, 501). One limitation of this research is that we are not yet in a position to compare coverage with other years.

Articles with the subject of child abuse and children’s issues were manually clipped from the newspapers during 2010 to form a database. A quantitative analysis counted variables such as page number, size of articles, and use of graphics. Data were entered into SPSS (18.0). Articles were then coded according to basic typology of abuse such as, child murder, sexual abuse, abandonment, or neglect (for extended reporting see Niner, Ahmad, and Cuthbert 2013). Once this was completed, all items were excluded that did not conform to child abuse as defined by the WHO:

Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. (WHO 2011)

The remaining 675 articles were then qualitatively assessed utilising the media analysis technique of “framing” (Iyengar & Kinder 1991) and coded as either episodic (specific event-focused much like a short crime report) or thematic (providing context and analysis like a feature article). Our analysis conformed to one of the main findings repeated in the international literature on newspaper coverage (Bullock 2007; Iyengar & Kinder 1991)—most articles were episodic in nature. Ideological, thematic frames were also identified through immersion in the material (quantitative analysis; reading and sorting into typology by WHO definition; coding of articles episodic or thematic). Researchers also composed a 2010 chronology of child abuse stories and contextualised events culturally, socially, and politically. Key thematic articles were identified and provided the data from which ideological frames emerged. We did not intend to provide a quantitative analysis of how many articles appeared in the press at the time, but instead we offer a qualitative analysis of

how the issue was framed because the latter is most significant to our study's findings. Our frame analysis considered the perspectives and status of people quoted and accompanying graphics. Through an iterative process, the two case studies and photos were chosen and are presented below within a feminist analysis.

Results: Overview of Media Portrayal of Child Abuse in Malaysia 2010

Malaysia's thirty million citizens are ethnically diverse¹ and this is reflected in the media. Four Malay-language newspapers reach 28 percent of the population; six Chinese-language papers reach 18 percent; and our two English-language dailies reach 9 percent.² This diversity is not reflected in political orientation which, due to the virtual control of Malaysian newspapers by the ruling political alliance, reflects mainstream government perspectives. TS is the highest-circulation English-language newspaper in Malaysia (around 300,000 per day), twice that of the NST (although NST articles also appear in the higher circulation Malay-language dailies *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*). Both newspapers are considered good quality and reliable papers, although well-known to be pro-government.

The NST is a self-confessed nationalist paper and much more concerned with local Malaysian society and popular culture. It reflects mainstream, modern, Islamic, Malay viewpoints in which child abuse is regarded as a highly political and controversial issue. An indicative example is an earlier thematic-style article, "Mom-ster in the home" (NST July 29, 2007, 1), presenting a horrified reaction to the revelation that collectively parents are responsible for half of the cases of child abuse in Malaysia. However, as the headline suggests, the horror is particularly reserved for mothers (rather than fathers or actual abusers) with journalists quoting a common Islamic proverb: "Mothers were created by God as He could not be everywhere." Although the article lists the supposed causes of abuse (family problems, mental illness, drug addiction, prior abuse, family separation, difficult children, exhaustion, and financial problems) adding other factors such as high density living and urbanisation, it is mothers who are judged as primarily responsible. God's deputies on earth are readily demonised and the mother becomes the "mom-ster."

Frames and Coverage

Both TS and NST carried sustained reportage of child abuse throughout 2010. The coverage included sensational cases of extreme child abuse, public reaction, and opinions of the state, experts, religious, and social commentators. In 2010 the NST published just over an article per day (369), while TS published just under (306). Conforming to internationally reported patterns, most articles, 68 percent (459), were found to be episodic. Media items coded as thematic, normally feature articles, amounted to 27 percent (181) (5 percent were "other"). Increases in reporting during March and July–August created a sense of national moral panic (cf. Ayre 2001, 889). During these spikes the quantity of media coverage increased and more thematic articles appeared (Niner, Ahmad, and Cuthbert 2013).

When thematic articles appeared at moments of heightened reporting, the range of perspectives expressed fell along an ideological spectrum from extreme religious conservatives emphasising Islamic morality and punishment, a middle ground emphasising a more modernising Islamic perspective, to the views of liberal progressives advocating modern, secular solutions. The middle-ground frame marries the "extremes" and largely represents the position of the government which is to be anticipated given the government control of both papers. The three positions on the spectrum compose our three qualitative ideological frames, some mix of which will represent the beliefs of most Malaysians. This

echoes Stiven's thesis on middle-class Malaysians embracing traditional and modern fragments in their post-modern lives (Stivens 1998a, 1998b).

Representation of Good and Bad Mothers

The middle-ground frame in our spectrum is represented by the comforting, maternal, often attractive faces of state representatives in uniform and Islamic headwear or civilian women similarly dressed who intervene and care for abused children. These representatives also bring to justice and rehabilitate abusive mothers. The example selected in Figure 1 is a "Protector" from the Welfare Department who cradles and fixes an abandoned infant with a kind maternal gaze (NST August 12, 2010, 6). Images of a veiled woman conform to a description of the female embodiment of a highly specific Malay modernity inherent in Malaysia's pro-natalist state policy which has become a "significant site of (Malay) nationalist symbolization" (Ong 1990 in Maila Stivens 1998c, 52).

A Welfare Department officer with the 11-day-old baby in Nilong Tebal yesterday. — NST picture by Rosli Ahmad

FIGURE 1

Good mother: welfare department "protector" (NST August 12, 2010).

Governmentality is also represented by the familiar faces and responses of the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil (see Figure 3 below) and the Prime Minister's wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor. They present the human, maternal face of the government in politicised moral debates about child welfare. Shahrizat and Rosmah, as they are popularly known, are given significant space in both newspapers. Their comments are presented uncritically with accompanying colour photos which provide a good indication of what editors choose to emphasise and endorse.

This feminised arm of government maintains fairly conservative Islamic positions on morality and ethics in its public presentations but, on occasion, the Minister advocates more progressive and pragmatic proposals to the problems faced by their modern society. These two senior women are presented in the media as moral exemplars of a modern Islamic womanhood which is regarded as being deeply maternal. Their representation is at once highly political and gendered, clearly indicating that issues pertaining to children are the concern and responsibility of women within the state. Notably, this also obviates the need for any involvement by "fathers" from the government.

The recurrence of these images of symbolic mothers contrasts with the images of the actual mothers of abused children. The images, symbolic and real, of good and bad mothers are sufficiently consistent to constitute a significant finding in this analysis. Such images provide an insight into how gender and motherhood are promoted, experienced and negotiated in

modern Malaysia. We selected two case studies to illustrate this finding: the abandonment of babies and the murder of very young children to analyse these recurring images of mothers.

Case study 1: abandonment of babies. Sustained media attention throughout 2010 concerning the abandonment of babies, or “baby dumping,” warrants analysis of the framing of this key issue and the privileging of the voices of government officials and politicians (cf. Souza 2010, 478–479). Three tragic cases of infant deaths in February 2010 followed several similar instances at the end of 2009 (NST February 16, 2010a). This problem was represented as associated with the Malay Islamic community, the core constituency of the NST, due to the illegality and shame of having a child out of wedlock and the lack of access to contraception and sex education (other ethnic communities may also abandon new-borns but this was not apparent in the media we examined). Young, unmarried mothers gave birth covertly and hid the baby or foetus to avoid detection, sometimes resulting in the death of the neonate. More progressive social welfare experts stated that the main cause of this problem is the stigma that young unwed mothers face due to conservative Islamic morality (NST August 30, 2010, 10; TS August 18, 2010, N42). Elsewhere, the connection between stigma and baby-dumping was seldom mentioned.

The February 16 NST feature article mentioned above (NST February 16, 2010a) described the condition of the bodies of five dead babies abandoned over the previous four months. Asserting that one hundred babies met this fate in Malaysia annually, the article presents this situation as fact and as a social crisis in need of urgent attention. An accompanying photograph of a stern Minister Shahrizat emphasises her calls for “awareness and religious programmes targeted at youth,” and reminds readers that her welfare officers or “protectors” will identify unwanted pregnancies and provide “assistance” to the mothers. The Prime Minister’s wife, Rosmah, was also quoted, declaring “dumping” as “cruel.” In another article in TS, Rosmah is quoted as calling for “stern action” against baby dumpers (TS February 16, 2010). On the same day, another article in the NST (February 16, 2010b) featured the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party’s (PAS) spiritual leader Datuk Nik Aziz, accompanied by a colour photograph of the elderly man attributing “baby dumping” to “too much freedom,” irresponsibility, lack of moral values among youth, and neglect of religious obligations. Aziz advocates a return to strict religious morals and punishment for offenders, which accords with the significant political constituency of PAS and represents the ideologically conservative frame in our analysis.

A much smaller series of articles in February provided the third more progressive viewpoint on abandoned babies and their mothers. Significantly, no photos accompanied these articles. Two stories appearing on February 17, one in TS (TS February 17, 2010) and one in the NST (NST February 17, 2010), quoted G. Palanivel, then Deputy-President (now President) of the Malaysian Indian Congress and a former Deputy-Minister of the Department of Welfare, who advocates empathy and support for the mothers. Palanivel may be unconcerned with offending Islamic sensibilities due to his Indian constituency. The NST also published another short article toward the end of the month: “Experts should hold talks in schools,” (NST February 28, 2010) quoting the Chair of the Parent Action Group, Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahmin, who advocated sex education in schools. Other articles presented the opinion of social welfare experts, academics or international consultants, such as the UNICEF representative to Malaysia, who empathised with the plight of the mothers and advocated new systems to cope with these situations (NST February 17, 2010). The February 2010 coverage sparked a public debate which included various solutions such as: increased punishment for

offenders, the “baby hatch” proposal, sex education, and more understanding for young adults.

On May 18, an article in TS reported the launch of a new television series “Zuriat Kita.” The programme aims to educate the public about the issue of abandoned babies: “Why it is happening and how to prevent it?”³ The article is adorned with a large colour photo of Rosmah and other beaming and attractive Muslim mothers (including the TV actress and her son) (TS May 18, 2010, 13). Rosmah is quoted as saying she believes those who abandon babies should be “brought to justice” along with the strengthening of “religious beliefs, family institutions and values and taking on a healthy and positive lifestyle.”

In June a large thematic feature article, “Circle of Love,” was published in TS (SM4) about OrphanCARE’s baby hatch which was opened on May 25 by Minister Shahrizat and the organisation’s efforts to find loving families for abandoned babies. In other press reports, conservative Muslims criticised the plan because they believed it would only encourage more unlawful sexual activity; a conclusion the Shelter Director rebuffed. The article portrays staff attempts to encourage empathy for the mothers and suggests that there might be more to their stories than simply loose morals:

. . . one should not put the blame solely on the mothers, many of whom hide their pregnancy—out of shame and fear of repercussions from society and family for having a child out of wedlock. Some are victims of rape . . . For a person to abandon her baby, she must have been in a terrible state of mind.

The positive discourse around the baby hatch solution is anchored in the middle-ground frame; it is criticised by the political and religious conservatives but lauded by progressives. The above article documents the government’s melding of the OrphanCARE solution for the babies, with a policy of harsh treatment toward the mothers, to placate the more conservative religious Muslim lobby. Blaming mothers is a useful political strategy.

In an August 19 TS article (TS August 19, 2010a, N2), July and August were dubbed “the baby-dumping season” due to alleged conceptions taking place during New Year and Valentine’s Day celebrations. The article contributed to another spike in child abuse reportage, with one particular case generating a number of items. A baby was found alive and taken to a local hospital. The parents were charged under new laws with intentionally abandoning a child: young factory worker, Mohammed Zolhalmi Khamis, eighteen, was sentenced to two years in jail and his unnamed girlfriend, seventeen, was to be detained at a “school” until her twenty-first birthday. No account from the young parents was presented. The parents of the girl stated the couple would later marry but no mention of the fate of the baby was made. Simple episodic articles were accompanied by colour photos of the young mother hiding her face (the photo presented in Figure 2 is from the article “Teen couple found guilty” [TS August 17, 2010a, 19]). No details about her are given; she is simply a symbol of shame. As evident in media articles and letters to the editor described above, the problem of “baby dumping” in Malaysia was portrayed in the media as

FIGURE 2

Bad mother of abandoned baby (TS August 17, 2010a).

a national social crisis and was deeply disturbing to the social consciousness of many Malaysian Muslims. The solution of the baby hatch was the outcome of this moral soul searching and a huge debate around the blaming and prosecution of the mothers was also apparent. The media representations of these young mothers was negative according to Islamic moral values but the actual retribution was obscured in the media demonstrating that there may be a contradiction between media reporting and the actual handling of the issue by the authorities.

Several thematic articles in the newspapers followed this case. One identified pornography as a main cause of baby dumping (TS August 17, 2010b, 19). Articles also debated the Cabinet initiative to charge parents caught baby dumping with attempted murder or murder, if the child died, with those found guilty facing up to thirty years in jail or the death sentence (NST August 13, 2010, 6). In this new policy targeting perpetrators, the government leans toward being conservative, punitive, and focussed on a narrow legalistic approach. A more sympathetic perspective presented in the same paper five days later illustrates the progressive frame: “Criminalising abandonment encourages someone, already in a terrible situation, to make a worse decision to hide a baby” (NST August 18, 2010, 17).

Letters and opinion pieces reveal divergent opinions reflecting both conservative and progressive views. The most contrary sides of an issue can sit side-by-side on a page (for instance see the Opinion Section in NST [August 26, 2010, 19]). The more conservative religious perspective includes negative imagery and violent language, such as those who call for the death penalty for baby dumpers (TS August 19, 2010b, 49). More progressive correspondents who employ calm and neutral language, call for empathy and assistance for baby dumpers or families in difficulty, and suggest more modern and secular approaches to these complex problems.

On March 15, 2010, a page-eight article in TS presented a different solution to baby dumping, “one-stop shelters for unwed mothers and their unwanted babies” which was rejected by the Minister who “had to be mindful of the sensitivities of the country’s religion and culture” (TS March 15, 2010, 8). She noted that her department provided “rehabilitation” for unwed mothers while calling for sex education in schools (although preferring the less controversial term “reproductive health”). Again, the tensions in the middle ground on this issue come to the fore: the Minister needs to balance social responsibility for the innocent babies, while maintaining a hard line on the shameful bad mothers. Mothers cannot keep their

babies and are treated as wayward criminals, deserving of the punitive fate of Islamic rehabilitation or prison.

The government's new policy was rationalised through the use of Islamic theological arguments presented in an unattributed August 7, 2010 NST article, "Syariah stand on abandoned children." This thematic feature article advocated the care of abandoned infants as "an act of great merit and service," while holding firm that the responsibility for the abandonment and possible death of the babies rests firmly with the mothers, and to a lesser extent the mostly absent fathers. It frames the emerging split within the government middle-ground perspective into two separate solutions: one for the babies—compassionate and caring as determined by Islamic ethics—and a more punitive one, also based on Islamic beliefs, for the sinning parents.

News articles created the impression that this problem was both new and rapidly increasing, suggesting a looming social crisis. The assumption in many reports was that "baby dumping" was a problem brought on by modernity and a break-down in traditional family values and society. The alternative, that this problem had always existed but simply been invisible or concealed, is only mentioned in one opinion piece by Zahara Othman (NST August 24, 2010, 22). It is likely that the news coverage contributed to the generation of a sufficient sense of moral panic to afford the Minister the "emergency" authority to introduce a major new policy shift. The Minister was presented as contributing to the resolution of the problem of abandoned babies through the baby hatch initiative, while continuing to denounce the young Islamic mothers who abandon their babies. The later was made easier by the invisibility in the government-controlled media of the perspectives of the young mothers who were simply presented in photos: mute, shamed, faces hidden.

Cases of rape or incest were only hinted at in the comments of a few of the more liberal commentators. However, the complex causes for the problem remained obscured, leaving it possible for mothers to be blamed.

Case study 2: child murder—Syafia, Hareswarra and Jasmine Lee. The abuse and subsequent death of three-year-old Syafia Humairah Sahari in February 2010 by her mother's boyfriend generated twenty-one separate articles across the two newspapers. The child's mother was Nurhamim Aziz, twenty-five, whose husband, Syafia's biological father, was a convicted murderer serving time in prison, making her current relationship adulterous and illegitimate according to Islamic law. The boyfriend, allegedly on drugs at the time of the killing, was in custody and facing a court hearing. There was some doubt as to the paternity of Syafia and both Aziz's family and her husband's had tried to claim her body from the hospital. Both adults were to be referred to the "Selangor Islamic Religious Council for further action" (NST February 8, 2010, 8).

One article, accompanied by a large photograph of Aziz with her head down, being counselled by the stern-looking Minister with an insert of the little girl, described the visit of Minister Shahrizat to the grieving, shamed mother (TS March 1, 2010, N4). The photograph of Aziz (see [Figure 3](#)) provides a didactic example of bad mothering accompanied by text which announces that she is being ordered into "rehabilitation." While not charged with abuse or murder, the media representation suggests she has already been found guilty of another charge: bad mothering.

FIGURE 3

Bad mother of murdered child (TS March 1, 2010).

No ministerial visit was reported as having been made to the parents of sixteen month old Indian boy Hareswarra Karigalam, abused and killed by his former babysitter's husband (eleven articles across the two papers during March 2010 [TS March 5, 2010, N3; TS March 8, 2010, N10; TS March 7, 2010, N3; TS March 12, 2010, W34; TS March 16, 2010, N8; NST March 5, 2010, 10; NST March 6, 2010, 10; NST March 11, 2010, 26; NST March 12, 2010, 6; NST March 16, 2010, 3; NST April 24, 2010, N]). The abuse and killing of Chinese girl Jasmine Lee by her stepfather and mother in April yielded five articles (TS April 16, 2010, 3; TS April 24, 2010, N3; NST April 15, 2010, 9; NST April 16, 2010, 14; NST April 24, 2010, 2); this case also failed to attract ministerial attention (nor did other cases later that year). In the Karigalam and Syafia case, it is implied that the mothers were culpable for the deaths; that they should have foreseen events and not left their children with the abusers. Nurhanim had left Syafia to go to work "in a karaoke joint" (NST June 8, 2010, B10) and she was reported as feeling that her neighbours blamed her for the death because of "her bad choice" (NST March 1, 2010, 8). Hareswarra's mother had reportedly left him with someone who was suspected of previous abuse. Due to the episodic style of the articles about Jasmine Lee there was not enough information to clearly understand what occurred.

The newspapers and the Minister focused more attention on the Islamic Malay family of three-year-old Syafia as an "early warning" to that society: "If we choose not to care, then a social tsunami will occur and erode moral values in our society."⁴ The moral, rather than the actual, responsibility for the abuse is assigned to the mother and is associated with her illicit relationship with the abuser. Minister Shahrizat repeatedly raises the spectre of a "social tsunami" in relation to child abuse, which accords with Stevens' description of omnipresent "apocalyptic discourses of family crisis" (Stevens 2006, 355). In her condemnation of the abuse and murder of Syafia, the Minister appears as concerned with Nurhanim's adultery and bad mothering as with the crime. Like the effects of the 2004 tsunami, this metaphorical tsunami is presented as a major catastrophe which originated from beyond Malaysian shores. Child abuse is often presented in this way as a consequence of foreign, Western-style development and associated social decline and the loss of family values. Such externalising bears parallels to blaming strangers for child abuse, as noted at the beginning of this paper. It is a common reaction motivated by a sense of disgust and horror that such crimes are perpetrated by intimate and trusted family and friends and associated with a level of personal responsibility. Externalising diverts scrutiny away from the domestic or home-grown characteristics, such as institutional patriarchy, which lead to child abuse and mitigates addressing local causes.

Furthermore, the media coverage of these three child murders conforms to the international pattern of the minority of extreme cases receiving the majority of media attention (cf. Ayre 2001). The more common incidents of child abuse, both neglect and less severe physical abuse, which are more problematic to portray and less sensational, remain obscured in the representation of child abuse in the Malaysian media. This distorts reality in several respects. Firstly, it is not “everyday” poverty, social disadvantage, isolation, mental illness, or discrimination (including that based on gender) that are identified as factors but the simple equation of an evil individual taking advantage of an innocent vulnerable child (or a “heinous” mother cruelly “dumping” her baby). Secondly, the fact that two thirds of child abuse victims in Malaysia are female is never represented. Typical portrayals of child abuse in the Malaysian news media that we examined thus do little to increase understanding or improve the situation for dysfunctional families or families in crisis, desperate young pregnant women or single mothers, or to prevent child abuse.

Discussion and Conclusions: Implications of the Representation of Mothers

The media coverage appears to suggest that child abuse is regarded as a significant concern in contemporary Malaysian society, particularly with regard to baby dumping and a perception of the need for a conservative moral framework for mothers. The newspaper articles and items we examined broadly present three “frames” on child abuse in contemporary Malaysian society: a conservative religious frame; the middle-ground frame as represented by a feminised and maternalised government; and, finally, a socially and politically liberal, progressive frame. These frames underpin a set of competing discourses around motherhood in contemporary Malaysian society.

We have undertaken a feminist analysis of how child abuse is framed in the specific cultural, religious and political context of two Malaysian English-language newspapers. Political interests are made apparent through the ways in which these newspapers report such issues, including favouring simple episodic framing and superficial, sensational coverage which scapegoats easily identifiable culprits. Linking the media’s tendency to attribute “social problems to individual pathology, rather than to structural disadvantage” (Mendes 2000, 55) to “powerful economic and ideological interests” is perhaps easier to do in Malaysia because of the overt control of the press by government. The media’s blaming of “strangers” and the pathologising and demonising of individual parents, especially mothers, for child abuse diverts attention from the contribution played by cultural, political, and ethical systems in the occurrence and perpetuation of the problem of child abuse.

The case study examined in this paper provides an example of the ways in which Western feminist media analysis might be refined and utilised in order to study the news media in post-colonial, Islamic, and conservative political societies. Thus, bearing in mind the Malaysian-specific cultural context of these representations of motherhood in the media, we note parallels between what we found in the English-language Malaysian press and what feminists have found elsewhere. As with the feminist analysis of Smart (1989) in the UK and others, we have identified a persistent discourse of mother blame that diverts attention from the male perpetrators of much abuse. Additionally, the “black and white” moralising found in much of the news reporting undermines more sophisticated, contextualised critiques of the underlying causes of abuse. However, in pointing to these parallels, we highlight the Malaysia-specific meanings at work in these representations.

Further work is required in Malaysia to develop a more culturally responsive gender analysis. A deeper investigation might provide concrete strategies for dealing with cases of child abuse in collaboration with local feminists and women's advocates.

The issue of child abuse as reported in the contemporary Malaysian press implicates those bad mothers whose protection ought to have prevented the abuse of their children, whose illicit sexuality exposes their children to maltreatment or abandonment or whose need to work leads them to place their children in inadequate care. There is a tendency to blame mothers for child abuse, even when they are not the perpetrators. We can see this particularly in the cases where perpetrators are the intimate partners of mothers—often extramarital—as in the case of Aziz. The further judgements and assessments of women according to their reproductive status and other variables have deeply divided feminists.

This is the case in how the bad Islamic mothers, like Aziz and the “baby dumpers,” are vilified in the Malaysian press and subject to punishment and “rehabilitation” by the good mothers who represent the state. More generally, the representation of mothers whose actions are portrayed as disturbing or challenging social norms as “bad” creates barriers to understanding the complex experiences of motherhood. That said, it is interesting to note that feminist theory does not yet adequately deal with the realities of child abuse perpetrated by women and needs to engage with this reality in order to avoid perpetuating essentialist views of women and mothers.

We can also see that blame for child abuse tends to be reserved for the mothers rather than the fathers of abused children, thus diverting scrutiny away from the patriarchal social and ethical system in which this problem is deeply rooted (cf. Mendes 2000, 2001).

The disproportionate blaming of mothers of abandoned babies, and their complete silencing in the Malaysian news media, is rich ground for future research by local feminists and advocates, research which may lead to deeper local understandings and therefore more comprehensive solutions to tackle child abuse in society.

The broad and rapidly changing politico-social structures of patriarchy, the Islamisation of society, and constructions of neo-traditionalist families in Malaysia since the 1970s have been theorised by scholars as responses to rapid modernisation of the country. Government campaigns in Malaysia promote Asian and Islamic family values which are politicising the domestic sphere, in which an idealised modern Malaysian mother assumes potentially overwhelming responsibilities. Exemplary motherhood, efficient domestic management, religious observance along with the roles of wife, career woman and nation builder combine to make women the shock absorbers of Malaysia's rapid economic and social modernisation. When things go wrong and child abuse occurs mothers are disproportionately blamed. Thus, the media's reporting of child abuse constitutes a significant site for the discursive struggle over the meanings of motherhood in contemporary Malaysia.

NOTES

1. Malays and other Indigenous make up 65 percent of the population; Chinese, 26 percent; Indians, 7.1 percent; and others, 1 percent (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2000).
2. Newspapers reach 54 percent of the population, compared to 94 percent reached by television, yet newspapers are the most popular source of information about politics (The Neilsen Company 2009).

3. *Zuriat Kita*, or “Our Offspring” was produced by an Islamic production company as a twelve episode series aired on Islamic Malaysian television pay channel Astro Oasis in July 2010.
4. The Minister used this imagery several other times: “Our laws are sufficient, but with this kind of public attitude we fear there will be a tsunami of abuse cases and of children being killed” (TS March 5, 2010) and “Family values play an important role in overcoming the social ‘tsunami’ in our country” (NST March 20, 2011).

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