# "Mother Can Try New Recipes for their Families"
## COVID-19 Lockdown in Malaysia, A Lens on the Changing Gender Relations Within Food Ways

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This paper attempts to provide an analysis of the short-term effects of the Covid-19 lockdown transformations of norms and practices pertaining the gendered division of domestic unpaid food-related work and consciousness of food and body image of Malaysian women. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society in South East Asia, where Islam is the official religion along with a considerable number of other religious followers - from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Taoism, Sikhism, Animism, among others. Since the 1970's, Malaysian society has been undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, leading to substantial transformations of the social position of women. As it is disrupting the routines, the lockdown is unfolding the many social intertwinement of gendered differentiation of the food-related work at the household and relationships to food while potentially driving accelerated transformations of the social and cultural norms, practices related to Malaysian foodways.

Given that the social and cultural contexts are shaping the ways in which these issues are negotiated both in the private and the public spheres, this research sheds light onto the contestation of the normative discourses related to gendered roles in food-related matters and consciousness of food within digital communications during the lockdown. The lockdown period under study covers the Movement Control Order, also known as MCO (from 18th of March 2020), the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO). Generally, CMCO has been declared from mid-April 2020 and ran up to the 9th of June 2020 and consisted of relaxation of the movements' restrictions given improvement of the sanitary conditions in the area.

We will first identify the theoretical foundations of the research based on a literature review related to transformations of gender relations, generally, and within foodways. Secondly, we will provide an overview of the intended methods of the study. We will conclude with some glimpses from the field.

## Literature Review:

Social history studies focusing on gender roles and equality have demonstrated the relatively high status of women as one of the distinctive traits of South-East Asia as a region compared with East and South Asia (Firth, 1966; Hirschman & Agahajanian, 1980; Reid, 1988; Kassim, 1988; Stivens, 1996; Ng, 1999). However, the patterns emerging from these studies on gender roles and family organization may not be valid anymore given the rapid urbanization happening since the 1970's along with the state interventions, which are demonstrating important reconfigurations surrounding the 'family' and 'private sphere' and leading to both contestation and adaptations (Manderson, 1996; Stivens, 1996, 2006). In the case of the Malaysian modernity path, Stivens (1998; 2006; 2019) suggests that the state-led modernity together with its moral project have developed visions around the family values where women are expected to protect the Nation from the dangers of modernity by taking a role combining the concept of the housewife with motherhood and childrearing - often aided in this task by

relatives or foreign domestic 'helpers' - in privatized urban domestic spaces. Thus, important reconfigurations surrounding the 'family' and 'private sphere' are displayed. The study of the relationships of the ideologies of 'family' and 'domesticity' with the formal work of women outside the home has been proven an insightful path of gender studies. For the past decades, feminist scholars have analysed the shifting meaning together with the boundaries and interactions between public and private spheres (see for example in Scott and Keates, 2004). Beyond feminist studies, the multiple and ever re-worked articulation between the so-called 'private sphere' of the household and/or family and the 'public sphere' of the state, the market and the media have been highlighted amongst others in Malaysia (Rappa; 2002; Sani, 2009; Stivens, 2006).

There is an agreement that the Southeast Asian statecraft and formal politics was and are mainly dominated by men (Manderson, 1980; Dancz, 1987; Ng et al, 2006; Mohamad, 2018, Mohamad et al., 2019). Additionally to the Malaysian women's organisations (Ng et al, 2006; Stivens, 2008; 2017; Spiegel, 2010), social media has globally emerged as a societal basis for debating gender relations by circulating counter-discourses, leading to the formulation of alternative identities and authorities. Following Abélès (1992) suggestion, we are considering the political action in everyday life as part of the multilayered complexity of political reality. Further than a locus of masculine domination, household food can thus be conceptualized as means of political contestation and resistance (Avakian & Haber, 2006; Verschuur, Guérin & Guétat-Bernard, 2014). Devasahayam (2005) demonstrates the relevance of foodways to unfold the ways Malaysian women contest, negotiate, transform, assert, and even reinforce gendered social and cultural identities. While the social relations to food have been organized along gender throughout history, the emergence feminist food studies would have required the conceptualization and investigation of interactions between women's food work in the labor market, their socially prescribed unpaid food-related work in the home, and their relationship with eating (Avakian and Haber, 2006; Allen and Sachs, 2007). The literature on the division of the food labor is usually focusing on the formal work in the public sphere. More and more scholars are considering the socio-cultural and unpaid work and the related mental load of the women in the private sphere, at home and with their families (DeVault, 1991) on top of the formal one. Conversely, studies unveiling gender relations specifically on household food-related informal load in contemporary Malaysia are very scarce (Devasahayam, 2005; Karupiah, 2019).

Additionally, consumption and the roles of women as 'managers' of food consumption within the households have been demonstrated as being important sites of the making of modern social forms and structures (Stivens, 1998). At the micro-social level, the disruptions of the routines in everyday life that are emerging from the lockdown may be apparent to many. We posit that these short-term changes could consequently lead to transformations at the macro-social level since social structures are produced and reproduced by those routines. In turn, we thus question: Which socio-cultural practices and norms related to gendered foodways are emerging in digital communications from the disruptions of routines during the Covid-19 lockdown?

**Methodology:**

This research was conducted using Netnography, which was found to be well suited as a 'remote' method to study social phenomena during the lockdown period. Netnography may be defined as a qualitative research approach that transposes and adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques to the study of the online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography involves a fast process of data collection, travel is not required, is unobtrusive in nature and is well suited to study trends in real time and well as over time. Given the timing as well as the constraints of this study, the social context and complexities of the research problem, and the training of the researchers, it was believed to be the most appropriate methodology to pursue. As all the data analysed in this study were publicly available, it precluded the need to secure informed consent of participants as *"...the observations take place only in public situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers"* (Shaw, 2018). However, we had to secure Informed Consent in the case of one of participants whose Facebook account was limited to friends only.

In line with our research objectives, first we examined the public service announcements (PSA) of the Malaysian government that were available on official social media and news platforms with specific regard to gendered foodways that were evident during the lockdown. We closed the loop by analysing the publicly available Facebook pages of four Malaysian professional women in Kuala Lumpur to see how these women provided glimpses into their day-to-day lived experiences during the six weeks of lockdown. Finally, the trends were coded, clustered and thematized to provide some emergent short-term trends.

**Findings:**

The 14th General Election (in May 2018) saw the success of the newly formed political coalition named *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope) over the long-term ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). In October 2018, pursuing an ideology of 'compassionate Islam', the Islamic Affairs Minister - supported by the Prime Minister - declared that enforcement of islamic laws should should not interfere with matters in the private sphere (Dzulkifly, 2018) before the government's fall barely two weeks before the lockdown was announced by its predecessor, the *Perikatan Nasional* (National Coalition). However, as the lockdown was declared on 16th of March and in an attempt to ensure harmony within 'locked' households, the Women and Family Ministry briefly issued a set of recommendations to working mothers on how to manage their households and families. Subsequently, much of the language used by policymakers in their public messaging during the lockdown was also cloaked in unexpectedly gendered language, thus bolstering the role of language as a reflection of gendered cultures. This gendered language could be seen as one of the assertions of the family values in the everyday politics and moral project of Malaysia (Stivens, 2006; Elias, 2020). Simultaneously, we note that the recommendations and gendered language from the government led to the denunciation of patriarchal social relations on social media. This incident reflects frictions and contestations related to gender relations, as well as cultural and religious identities.

It was not unexpected that control of bodies and spaces would emerge as the primary focus of institutional control to stop a highly infectious disease from spreading. In understanding the

public service announcements, we consider the dynamics and tensions involved in the transformations of bodily and spatial formations, and the changes provoked by such situations, with a particular emphasis on gender dimensions as it related to food-related work.

### *Reconfiguration of the connotation of the inside & outside of the house and shift in gender roles*

A private-public dichotomy had emerged during the lockdown period into which gender was intertwined in the demarcation of public and private spaces. The 'outside' was conceptualized as the 'action zone' where infection was prevalent and was perceived as a 'masculine' space. The 'inside' on the other hand, was constructed as the 'safe zone' and thus a 'feminine' space. The announcements and guidelines specifically led to the construction of the notion of the 'domestic women' who were essentialized as "mothers" and "wives" who would *"... now have more time at home and they can try all sorts of new recipes to cook for the family."* In a series of Facebook posts, the women's ministry offered tips on how wives should behave while the restrictions were in place. Women who were working from home, were advised to dress up well, apply make-up and speak endearingly to their husbands in a 'Doraemon-like' voice. Such an institutionalized conceptualization led to the reconfiguration of gender and the public/private with regard to foodways as women were expected to stay home and prepare food. Unsuspectingly, women found themselves pushed into prescribed roles as mothers and wives whose primary role was to maintain household harmony and shoulder the unpaid house-work at a time when many were also required to work from home, *"... holding a ladle in one hand and the phone on the other"* (Endut, 2020).

Meanwhile, the head of the households (assumed to be men) were allowed to leave the house to purchase daily necessities and medication during the movement control order period. This interpretation is supported by the reply of the participants when a friend questioned why she did not go along with the husband for shopping: *"Kalutthividuraan [release] him. I takut [scare] for the virus la... Must be extra careful."* When he returns home, she posts a message saying *"My husband came from outside, I made him shower with Dettol water and vinegar."*

This reconfiguration of the 'outside' versus 'inside' conceptualisation and shift in gender roles led women to do remote shopping where they were still the ones in charge of the decisions remotely, while the execution is left to men who are allowed to get out of the house. The shift in the gendered roles required acquisitions of skills and informal training as indicated in one the replies from the participant to one of the friends' comments: *"Awwwwwhhh... I trained my husband dy. Now is test period so cant cheat. If he gets it wrong, he and the crabs stay outside..."*

Women seems to have taken the opportunity of this prescribed shift in the roles during the MCO to tease men, even those who were not direct family members. As mentioned by one of the friends' participants in the comments: *"Dont give my mom idea pls. She still remember I forgot to buy roti [bread] and accidentally bought indo mee."* On which the participant replied *"Hahahahahaahah! That was a simple task dei! You failed ur test big time!"*.

The reconfiguration of the public and private sphere appears to question the load of women, between formal & paid and socio-cultural & unpaid work. Some men are newly taking charge of part of the preparation of the meals. The MCO becomes then a sort of training ground for

the cooking skills where women are complementing the outcomes and finding a challenger to their cooking skills.

### *Distance with Prescribed Gendered Roles*

A post containing a cartoon of Doraemon wearing an apron and applying make-up without any written comments (but emoji) clearly refers to the contestation that the recommendations to working mothers on how to manage their households and families from the Women and Family Ministry (on 30th of March) have led to. Here the participant takes distance with the prescription of *"Avoid[ing] wearing house clothes, dress up as usual and neatly"* and taking charge of the domestic work by using one the caricatures produced by the contestations of the reassertion of the moral enterprise of the Women and Family Ministry (Stivens, 1998; 2006; 2019).

Humour serves the creation of a critical distance with prescribed gendered roles; For example, it is jokingly envisaged to 'boil' the husband as he returns from the outside. The comments from friends on that post are clearly establishing the relation and the critical distance with the recommendations from the ministry. One of them will for example comment *"While doing all that I hope you sounded like Doreamon and oh ya did you give him that little giggle at the end."* on which the participant replied *"Oh yes yes how can I forget that?!! Instructions from Minister! Must abide!"*. A wide range of jokes seem to make fun of the assigned gendered roles to women, supposed to be a loving wife that always cares for her husband and family, this care being demonstrated by cooking.

### *Showcasing the upgraded cooking skills*

Towards the end of May, recurrent showcasing of homemade dishes appears in posts. The only comment *"homemade (mango pulut / nasi lemak)!"* highlights the pride taken in cooking homemade food and possibly simultaneously the ambivalent position of women in between the contestation of the gendered roles and the pride taken in mastering cooking skills & caring for the family.

For some single women, on the other hand, the showcasing of home cooked products were observed right from the start of the MCO. A series of posts showcased the creative culinary skills of a participant who not only regularly tried out new recipes, but also used various products from her garden to prepare tasty and visually appealing meals.

In one of her posts she playfully remarks that only now she has the time to spend on preparing food. She also actively engages with her friends on best recipes and ingredients to use, and a friend comments *"Stay at home, kan?"* and then writes in Malay that soon she would finish all the food that was at home.

### *Supporting Working Women with Food, Building Social Ties*

The disruption of routines in the daily lives of working women, and their coping strategies is another emergent theme. Posts were also expressing acknowledgement of the cooking skills and food received as a sign of care by and from relatives. The value supported by the "homemade" characteristic of the food is highlighted in the comment when replying to a comment informing about that a famous stall is opened. These posts are not without

reminding the role of food in "doing family" previously highlighted by Marjorie DeVault (1991).

The post below by a participant captures the blurring of boundaries on the first hectic week of the MCO, while describing her new routine of juggling work and household chores, including cooking two meals a day , demonstrating the mental load she carried at that time. *"This is what my lockdown week has been like"* she posts *"... on top of cleaning, cooking 2 meals, moppings and meeting. My students and I have realised the strength of human resilience to adapt…"*

Working women reached out to, and received support from immediate and extended family, as well as close friends, who provided food items from time to time in order to ease the pressure of having to source for, and prepare, food on a daily basis while attending to official work from home. As a collection of posts show how some of them had found a successful way to deal with the disruption in routines. A participant posts a picture of a plate of home baked cookies that were prepared by her teenage daughters. When friends playfully ask her to share the recipe, and that they want to place orders, she says "Please order with my daughters". Half way through the MCO, she uploads a picture of a delectable chicken salad and comments *"When you have a crazy day working from home, and your kids make you lunch"*, followed by a comment *"Joy of having teenagers"*.

A strong sense of community can also be seen in many other posts, where the participant thanks her friends and families for reaching out a much-needed helping hand with food. When her older sister sends her a box of homemade cookies. She says *"I am loved. Just what I needed after a stressful week"* and adds three heart emojis. In response to a friend's response to the picture, she replies *"Best things about sisters"*. Another post is titled *"Love thy neighbour"* and states *"lovely to be greeted this morning by a bag of freshly plucked and cleaned bag of jackfruits hung on the fence by your neighbour"*.

### *Food and Body image Consciousness Among Women*

The association of being confined to the home with limited physical activities, excessive eating and the consequent gain of weight was a serious concern in the social media posts of women. One of the participants, who experimented with food often, also uploaded daily videos of herself exercising during the entire period of MCO. She copiously used hashtags like #covid19moment and #workoutforchampionstayathome. Her female friends showered her with compliments like *"You're looking great, babe..fit and strong"*. She often used food as a reward as she shared pictures of elaborate meals throughout the MCO as *"a simple breakfast for champion stay at home after morning workout"*. When she posts *"Tadaa… ice blended milk, dalgona coffee at the bottom and Valrhona chocolate ice cream from* Inside Scoop *and some* KitKat Bites *for the topping"*, her friends remarks *"That's just evil"*. The participant responds *"I need to burn the calories later"* and another friend comments *"Patutlah kena workout [of course, you will have to work out]"*. Her fitness videos evoke envy from her friends who claim they are too lazy to workout regularly, and at the end of MCO, she uploads a picture of herself in a tight-fit dress, and her friends pile her with compliments like *" Look at your arms!! Jealous Lah"*, *"Look at the muscle arms"*, *"Love the toned arms and body"*, *"All your hardwork and dedication is paying off. You are looking awesome"*.

Another participant starts her own fitness journey and says *"I am not doing this to be like very thin. I am doing this because I got Covid-FAT 2020 to the point I am uncomfortable again"*. She started a Youtube channel to document her journey not expecting people to see the videos, but so that she would be 'honest' with the journey. Her friends egg her on with supportive comments. Her journey continues.

**Concluding Remarks:**

Overall, the contribution of this study is twofold. It first provides a gender lens for understanding the impact of Covid-19 which highlighted the specific vulnerabilities that women face because of deep-rooted inequalities and traditional gender role expectations, specifically in terms of the mental load related to gendered roles in food management. By doing so, the study asserts well-established observations of the various forms of discrimination and domination embodied in the gendered division of food related work (Counihan, 1999; DeVault, 1994; McIntosh & Zey, 1998).

Secondly, grounded in an understanding of the multilayered complexity of political reality (Abélès, 1992), this research contemplates everyday life and home as locus of politics and resistance. The lockdown - and its subsequent 'work from home' - and the use of social media has re-questioned the essentialized division between the public and the private spheres and the interactions between women's work in the labor market, their socially prescribed unpaid food-related work in the home, and their relationship with eating in conjunction with body politics. Subsequently, the lockdown reorganized the processes by which individuals – and especially women - are possibly asserting their autonomy from the institutions such as State, family, occupation, or the (family) meal (Herpin, 1988). The role of food in creating and strengthening social ties amongst women communities has given rise to an emerging solidarity supporting a contestation of the enormous mental load carried by women in these times. The power of professional women is asserted by their financial contributions in a context of high economic uncertainties. The demanding nature of the formal and paid work by being transferred to home has been made visible and valued by the rest of the family members. We can assume this characteristic to be of greater importance in the case of joined families, specifically in highly competitive metropolitan environments. Besides, the reconfiguration of the outside/inside nexus leading men to take over the food sourcing could have led to the acknowledgement of critical skills required by informal, unpaid and socio-culturally prescribed roles of food management at home. All in all, contestations seem to be associated with love in the renegotiation of the division of the socio-cultural and unpaid work at home and leading to training and transferring skills in the aim of ultimately sharing it among the family members. Thus, as we emerge from the lockdown, certain practices have evolved and been normalised where the different members of the family (including extended family) are playing their parts.

However, the internalised surveillance of food behavior seems to be perpetuated through the lockdown where the posts of professional and urbanites women are extensively commenting their concerns pertaining their food intakes, physical activity and their implications in terms of body image. Further inquiries are required to unveil how the lockdown period could have

been a time of socially and culturally differentiated agency of women and internalisation of the locus of control in regards to body politics.

Importantly, women's posts analysed in this study are emerging from empowered women, from upper social class and metropolitan environment. They might be reflective upon their practices and hence fitting more the objectives of this study. This should not lead to forget the increased domestic violences, dominance and challenges faced by women during the lockdown. As the pandemic unfolds, there is an urgent need to gather qualitative data on social and institutional discourses to understand how politics in everyday life are prescribing Malaysians how to behave - socially, domestically, as at the workplace - during the lockdown. Access to food remains one of the most essential challenges for households' organization of the lockdown. Thus, the nature of changing gendered relations in food should emerge as an area of importance to policy-makers that would lead to the development and implementation of effective policy measures providing a more authentic and equitable response to the pandemic.

**Acknowledgement:**

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