



Vulnerable Groups and Covid-19 (Part 2)

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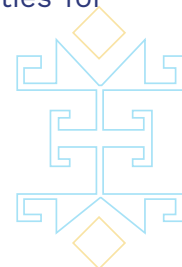


Introduction

Throughout the month of March, SEAN-CSO's campaign continued to focus on the theme of Vulnerable Groups and COVID-19. It has now been over a year since the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. Life, as we knew, was suddenly upended and over the past twelve months, communities around the world have faced new challenges, grieved countless losses, developed alternate ways of doing things, innovated important technologies, and hoped for better days. With vaccine production picking up, the light at the end of the tunnel is becoming more visible. Vaccination is a crucial piece of the puzzle, but until herd immunity is reached, it is important to continue wearing masks and practicing social distancing.



This month, we spoke to Mahi Ramakrishnan, an investigative filmmaker, journalist, and refugee rights activist. She has spent the past sixteen years working with refugee communities and is the founder of Beyond Borders Malaysia. Already an important organization for many people, since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, Mahi and her team have been working around the clock to support refugees and migrant workers who have been disproportionately affected by this global health crisis. In speaking with her, we were inspired by her dedicated efforts and push for organizations to hold spaces and create opportunities for marginalized communities to speak for themselves.





Interview

Interview with Mahi Ramakrishnan

Beyond Borders Malaysia

Mahi Ramakrishnan is an investigative filmmaker, journalist, and refugee rights activist. She is the founder of Beyond Borders, a non-profit organization that promotes and protects the rights of refugees, stateless persons, and asylum seekers in Malaysia. She also founded The Refugee Fest, a four-day event that highlights the artistic talents of refugees and serves as a bridge to connect them with Malaysian society. In December 2020, she started Biryani Wallahs, an initiative that helps refugee women and single mothers make a living despite challenges posed by Covid-19. Mahi also works closely with Malaysian lawmakers advocating and lobbying for the right to work, education, and healthcare for refugees.



Over the past sixteen years, Mahi has written multiple reports and made several films about the Rohingya community. Her most recent film: “Bou: Bride,” was released in 2017 and focuses on young Rohingya girls who are transported from Myanmar and sold as child brides to Rohingya men in Malaysia. The documentary explores the logistics of the trafficking system from the negotiation of payments to the falsification of documents. The film is a testimony to the unfathomable and perpetual abuse endured by thousands of Rohingya girls. The documentary was selected for fourteen international film festivals and won nine international awards.

About a year after “Bou: Bride,” was released, Mahi founded Beyond Borders in Malaysia in 2018. As highlighted on their website, “Beyond Borders Malaysia believes in refugee-led advocacy and empowers refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons to speak up about their rights. It challenges the government to engage with them on their right to work, education and healthcare, and works to rebuild futures.”

Mahi explained that in the early days of Beyond Borders, she made it clear that the organization would not do aid distribution. She felt that she did not have the proper expertise or training. However, ever since the pandemic began in March 2020, she has had to shift gears. The communities she works with trust her, which she believes is the most important thing. During the interview, she said, “I have had the honor of earning unconditional love and trust which has made it possible for us to now go in and support communities with Covid relief.” Over the past year, the Beyond Borders team has been on the ground helping to provide aid in the form of food, personal protective equipment, and toiletries.

Recently, Mahi has also been conducting research on the unprecedented rise in

xenophobia and hate speech against different refugee and migrant communities, with the Rohingya as the biggest target. She explained that “last year the hate speech was very well choreographed and crafted, so we realized there were organizations and political figures behind it. Malaysia is not a great place for migrants, it never has been. We have seen hate-speech in the past, but this time, the onslaught was unlike anything that has happened before.” As a member of the Asia Pacific Partnership for Atrocity Prevention (APPAP), Mahi conducted research and published a paper that analyzed the rise in hate speech, why it was happening, and who was being targeted.

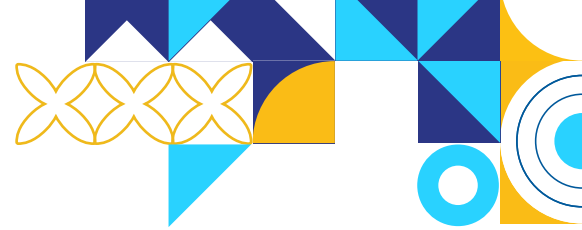
Mahi also noted that “during the 2020 Refugee Fest, (which had to be virtual), many refugees were terrified to speak on panels because of what was happening, so every panel discussion had Malaysians speaking for and on their behalf. I decided to have one camera in my house showing an empty chair. There were four frames and one of them was the chair. That denoted the absence of the refugees who are very much present in the topics being discussed. It started a ‘Do you see the empty chair movement?’ It went viral because people realized that I was trying to make a point.”

At the end of the interview, Mahi emphasized that “when you work with marginalized communities, it is not about profiting off them. You should not use their stories or their narratives as a way of gaining sympathy, because that does not help anyone. It does not help you and it does not help the community. These communities do not need your pity. They do not need you to dramatize what is happening. Refugees are so much more than the persecution that they have endured and experienced. They are human beings with individual strengths, talents, and expertise. At the end of the day, we should be dedicated to

really creating opportunities for marginalized communities. At Beyond Borders we emphasize taking a step back, talking to them, asking them what they want, and not making decisions for them.”

To learn more about Beyond Borders Malaysia and the impactful work they do, check out their Facebook: @BeyondBordersMsia, their Instagram: @beyondbordersmsia and their website: www.beyondbordersmalaysia.org





Research: Vulnerable Groups and Covid-19

Free of the Coronavirus: The Story of Baduy (Kanekes) People, Indonesia

The Baduy, who refer to themselves as the Kanekes (Urang Kanekes or Orang Kanekes), is an indigenous tribe in the southeastern part of the province of Banten on the island of Java. Living at the base of the Kendeng Mountains, they are one of few communities that have had 0 Covid cases in the last year. Indonesia has a population of 270.6 million and has tallied over 28,000 cases since March 2020. However, the approximately 11,600 Baduy have so far made it through unscathed by the virus.

The Baduy have long avoided outside influences and work hard to maintain their livelihoods independent of mainstream Indonesian society. Within the community, there are three sub-groups:



One of the biggest factors in their Covid success is their respect for and belief in local authority figures. When the pandemic began, anyone living or traveling outside of the community was told to promptly return home and they did. Furthermore, their territory was quickly closed off to outsiders and no tourists, officials, or journalists have been permitted to enter since May.

Sources:

Hastanto, Ikhwan. "This Tribal Community in Indonesia Claims To Be COVID-Free." VICE News. January 26, 2021.

"The Baduy of Indonesia." The University of Iowa, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Linguistics.

"Baduy tribe remains free of coronavirus." Jakarta Post. May 17, 2020.





Member Highlights



Islamic Women's Association of Australia *from Australia*



Source: <https://iwaaw.org.au/gallery/>

IWAA (formerly known as the Islamic Women's Association of Queensland (IWAQ)) is a community organisation that offers a wide range of services to assist people in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia from culturally, linguistically & religiously diverse (CALD) backgrounds. It was established in 1991 with the intention of supporting Muslim women and their families and assisting with their unmet needs. Since then, IWAA has grown in size and scope and now works with men, women, and children (both Muslim and non-Muslim). The Association also acts as a diverse multicultural body with representation from Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Asia and the Pacific, in addition to its Australian and indigenous community members.

IWAA receives funding from the Department of Social Services (DSS) via the Settlement Grants Program (SGP) which provides assistance for new arrivals to reside in Australia. As highlighted on the Settlement Council of Australia's website: "SGP aims to help clients become independent and active members of the wider community. Services provided include but are not limited to: social support and networking, advocacy and assistance, employment support, driving and road safety skills, and school-based homework clubs." Overall, individuals are helped with a wide range of needs with the goal of reducing feelings of isolation and the construction of a sense of identity and belonging in Australia.

In the past year, IWAA acquired Sakina Women's Refuge Inc. an organization that provides housing and support for women (and their children) who are escaping domestic violence. Sakina provides these women with a safe shelter and facilitates programs that help them establish autonomy and independence. They are able to engage with various specialists including doctors, psychologists, allied health practitioners, social workers, employment consultants and government and non-governmental agencies. A domestic violence caseworker works with these women during their time with Sakina and helps them construct a plan for the future. This program is extremely significant because prior to the founding of Sakina in 2014, there were very limited options for CALD women who were experiencing domestic abuse. The programs that did exist were not properly equipped to serve religiously and culturally diverse clientele.

To learn more about IWAA's amazing work and services, check out their Facebook: @IWAAAustralia, their Instagram: @iwaaw_aust, and their website: www.iwaaw.org.au



Program Studi Agama dan Lintas Budaya
Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies
Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada

The Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (Program Studi Agama dan Lintas Budaya) at the Graduate School, Universitas Gajah Mada (UGM)

from Indonesia

The Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) is part of the Graduate School at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the country's largest university. The Center was established in 2000 as Indonesia's only interdisciplinary academic program with a focus on religious studies within a non-religiously affiliated university. With its diverse faculty and students, CRCS is an excellent institution, known for its environment of intellectual rigor and dynamic exchange on the study of religion within various cultural contexts.

As outlined on the CRCS website, "the academic work of the Center is focused on three main areas of study: (a) inter-religious relations; (b) religion, culture and nature; and (c) religion and public life. These areas are reflected in the courses offered as well as directions of its research." Furthermore, CRCS regularly conducts research and disseminates publications on a variety of topics including: "religion and politics, religious freedom, management of religious diversity, interreligious dialogue, religion and science, religion and ecology, and indigenous religions."

A couple years ago, CRCS began collaborating with the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University and the WatchdoC Documentary to produce an elaborate multimedia project called "Indonesian

Pluralities." The films focus "on cultural and religious diversity, democracy, and civic co-existence in contemporary Indonesia." Some of the contexts that are highlighted include: "the everyday relations between Muslim and Christian communities in a post-conflict area of Ambon; the struggle for equality among indigenous communities whose beliefs and rituals are not fully recognized but slowly secures better legal recognition; the turmoil created by a variety of political Islamic groups; the achievements and controversies surrounding the place of Muslim women in modern Indonesian society; and the public space of religious education on which the future of pluralist democratic Indonesia will depend."

Overall, "the series portrays Indonesia as a dynamic site of great promise and disputes about what Indonesia is, and what it should become. The film series is, in short, the story of an unfinished but hopeful Indonesia."

To learn more about CRCS' amazing work, check out their Facebook: @crcspascasarjanaugm, their Instagram: @crcs_ugm, and their website: <https://crcs.ugm.ac.id/>



How to make a self-recorded video:



Want to be exclusively featured on SEAN-CSO's Social Media? We want to hear more from you, especially in these pandemic times. You can talk about interesting projects that you're currently involved in, how the pandemic has affected your work or organization in the field, or anything related to P/CVE issues.

Still don't know how to make a good video? Don't worry, we have got your back. We have created this simple 2-minute tutorial on how to make a decent self-recorded video in your own home. Stream it online on YouTube:

bit.ly/SelfRecTutorial

Funding Opportunity

Asian Peacebuilders Scholarship Program

▶ bit.ly/SEANCSO-UfP

Business Partnership Facility

▶ bit.ly/SEANCSO-BPF

USAID: Civil Society and Media Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions

▶ bit.ly/SEANCSO-USAID

International Fund for Cultural Diversity

▶ bit.ly/SEANCSO-UNESCO

Updates

- SEAN-CSO currently *has*



- All SEAN-CSO social media is *followed by*



- SEAN-CSO posts focused on PVE *receive*



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Also check our website:

sean-cso.org

Synergy in Harmony

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Would you like to be featured in the next SEAN-CSO Newsletter or in our upcoming social media campaign?

If you have stories, research, or programs focused on Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism, contact us at:

This update has been brought to you by SEAN-CSO in collaboration with Peace Generation Indonesia.

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