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## **Malaysian women's rights activists under investigation for refusing to wear hijab**

By Martin Banks

New Europe (23.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2HsGp7n> - Campaigners have joined forces to condemn an investigation of three women by Malaysia's Islamic authorities who refused to stop wearing a hijab.

The three women, Maryam Lee, Mohani Niza and Dian Sofia, attended the launch of "Unveiling Choice", a book documenting Lee's decision to stop wearing the traditional Islamic head covering.

The event included a three-hour panel discussion between the three, which Lee described as an "intellectual discourse based on the women's lived realities."

After hearing about the event, Malaysia's religious affairs minister, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, ordered the Islamic authorities of Selangor to investigate the women.

In a joint statement, Lee, Niza, and Sofia said they were "unequivocal" in their belief that none of Malaysia's laws had been violated.

"We condemn this unnecessary investigation as an abuse of power and is aimed at harassing and intimidating women activists who are speaking out on issues that affect women and organisers those who do not serve the status quo."

The executive director of a Malaysia's human rights and law reform organisation Lawyers for Liberty, Latheefa Koya, said women in Malaysia should not be investigated for discussing their religious choices.

"This does not mean those who attended the forum would lose their faith. Let a woman think freely and choose whether they want to wear the hijab or not," said Koya.

"Muslim women in our Western liberal democracies complain that their right to wear a scarf, a niqab or a hijab in public institutions and in the public space is not respected," said Willy Fautre, the director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, a Brussels-based rights group who spoke with New Europe. "Women in Iran and Malaysia complain that they are forced to wear a headscarf, and who challenge the repressive laws of their country, are at the risk of losing their freedom as it has recently been the case with Vida Movahedi. She was sentenced to 1 year in prison in Iran for refusing to cover her head. These courageous women dramatically need the support of human rights organisations."

Malaysia, where 60% of the population is Muslim, has long been held up as a moderate and relatively progressive Muslim country, but recently there has been a move towards strict Islamic conservatism.

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## Malaysia investigates women who discussed their 'dehijabbing'

*Move by Islamic authorities condemned as attempt to 'intimidate women activists'*

Hannah Ellis-Petersen South-east Asia correspondent



**A Malaysian woman walks past mannequins displaying hijabs at a market in Kuala Lumpur. Photograph: Manan Vatsyayana/AFP/Getty**

Three women in [Malaysia](#) who held an event discussing their decision to stop wearing the hijab are being investigated by Malaysian Islamic authorities.

The event, hosted over the weekend at the Gerakbudaya bookshop in the Petaling Jaya area, was held to mark the launch of *Unveiling Choice*, a book documenting the author and activist Maryam Lee's decision to stop wearing the hijab.

The event, *Malay Women and Dehijabbing*, featured a three-hour panel discussion between Maryam and two other Malaysian women, Mohani Niza and Dian Sofia, who had also decided to no longer wear the hijab.

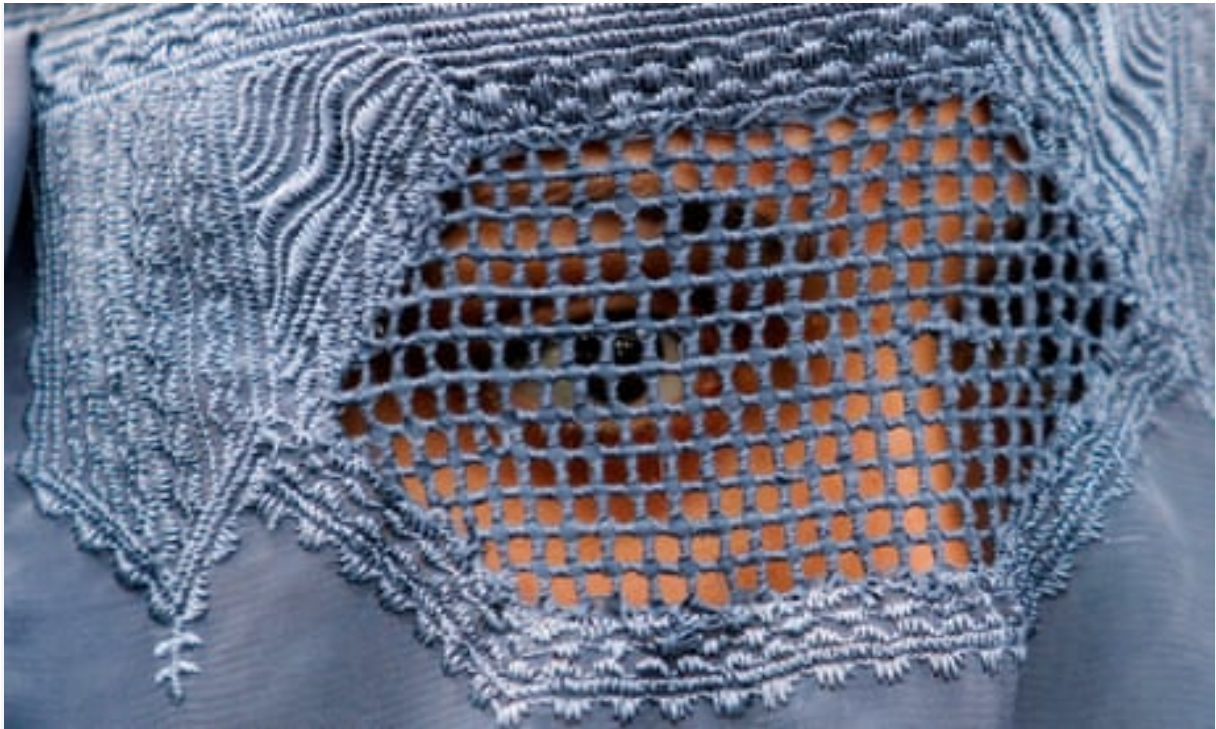
Maryam said the panel was an "intellectual discourse based on the women's lived realities", after which the audience had left "on a good note", but a backlash on social media began to build that had "distorted" the content discussed, mainly by those who had not attended the talk.

It caught the attention of the religious affairs minister, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, who expressed concern about the event and prompted the Islamic authorities of Selangor to investigate it in a "fair and just manner".

On Tuesday morning, Jabatan Agama [Islam](#) Selangor religious officers visited the bookshop, which is owned by the publisher of *Unveiling Choice*, and demanded to see copies of the book and get accounts of the event from staff.

The three women said that beyond the religious affairs minister making a public statement about the investigation, they had not been informed of what action was being taken against them or the publisher.

However, in a joint statement Maryam, Mohani and Dian said they were “unequivocal that there has been no transgression of Malaysian laws”.



***'I lost consciousness': Woman whipped by the Taliban over burqa without veil***

“We condemn this unnecessary investigation as abuse of power to harass and intimidate women activists who are speaking up on issues affecting women, and organisers for intellectual discussions that do not serve the status quo,” they said.

Malaysia, where about 60% of the population is Muslim, has long been held up as moderate and relatively progressive. However, in recent years there has been a rise in Islamic conservatism, emboldened by the growing influence of the Malaysian Islamic party, which recently has pushed for elements of sharia law to be implemented throughout the north-eastern state of Kelantan.

In September [two women were publicly caned](#) after the north-eastern state of Terengganu’s sharia high court found them guilty of trying to have sex with each other.

Latheefa Koya, executive director of Lawyers for Liberty, said women in Malaysia should not be investigated for discussing their religious choices.

“It does not mean those who attended the forum would lose their faith,” she said. “Let a woman think freely and choose whether they want to wear the hijab or not.”