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***Malaysian Women  
Creating  
Their  
Political  
Awareness***

Edited by

Robert Haas and Rahmah Hashim

Friedrich Naumann Foundation

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Friedrich Naumann Foundation (Germany)  
Lot 3-3 Impian Kota  
Jalan Manau  
Off Jalan Kampung Attap  
50460 Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia  
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NASKHAT PEMELIHARAAN  
PERPUSTAKAAN NEGARA MALAYSIA

## FOREWORD

Traditionally, most cultures world wide have treated politics as more or less a male domain. The rare historical occurrences of a woman (or women) taking over the reins of political power are recorded and renowned but this is largely due to their novelty value. Even in the so-called modern developed world there is no country where the women are, on an average, as politically active as the men. Malaysia is no exception to the rule.

Though there may in some cases be a high percentage of women in a party, the figures do not reveal much about how active these women are or are allowed to be within the party system. In the seminar that served as a basis for this book, some women members of political parties reported their disappointment at being reduced to technical-support roles or figureheads. However it is true that the aspirations of many other women do not go any further than that.

The seminar was organised with the intention of obtaining an overview of the present situation, its causes and the future direction of the situation in Malaysia. An article about the situation of women in German politics is included to juxtapose a point of comparison and a different viewpoint in the cultural sense.

As Malaysian women gain more exposure to quality education and engage in increasingly qualified professions, more of the traditional role models for women will crumble, bringing the dawn of political empowerment. In this situation there will be many women who will be dissatisfied with the *status quo* - the role which circumscribes them and keeps them out of political power. On the other hand, there may yet be a large number of women who are not interested or willing to participate in the political process.

Women must be made aware of how politics influences their own lives which necessitates them to take an active interest in it. This persuasion can be painstaking but is the essential path to awaken the latent political consciousness of women. Whether the female perception of the process of political activity is similar to the political consciousness of men will be revealed in the fullness of time. The mere act of discussing these topics openly is a political act on its own.

Talking about women's political consciousness in Malaysia was considered to be daring. So when we decided among ourselves to have a seminar on this topic, we were warned that this was a bit courageous. In spite of this we persisted and it was a success. The Hon. Minister of

National Unity and Social Development, Dato' Napsiah Omar, opened the seminar in her official capacity and it was not hard to find speakers and participants from various groupings and parties. In fact, it seemed as if the women had impatiently waited to discuss this topic, as we had to turn down quite a number of applications for participation. Sadly enough, no males attended, apart from the organiser and the sponsor. Remarkable was the interest the seminar evoked in the media. Weeks after the event the press continued to be an arena for clashes between various factions on how to interpret various elements of the seminar.

The contributions in this book are based on the papers that were presented in the seminar. However, in several cases they are completely revised for the purpose of printing.

Robert Haas  
Friedrich Naumann Foundation

Khairul Bashar  
AIDCOM

## CONTENTS

### FOREWORD

MALAYSIAN WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS: A Historical Perspective <i>Dato' Khoo Kay Kim</i>	1
GENDER: A Social Factor in Political Consciousness and Active Participation <i>Askiah Adam</i>	8
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND FEMALE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN GERMANY: A Case for Comparison <i>Robert Haas</i>	18
WOMEN POWER IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL CHANGE: A Potential Resource <i>Tan Poo Chang</i>	37
RELIGION AND CULTURE: Prohibitive Factors for Women's Participation in Politics? <i>Salbiah Ahmad</i> <i>Wu Ming Chu</i> <i>Devaki Krishnan</i>	47 53 61
ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROMOTING POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN <i>Abdul Rahman Sulaiman</i>	66
ETHNICITY, POLITICAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION <i>Kamilia Ibrahim</i> <i>Tan Yee Kew</i> <i>Toh Kin Woon and Surin Leong</i> <i>M Pathmanathan and Mrs Jaya Partiban</i>	71 75 78 87
FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION SYSTEM AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN <i>Saliha Hassan</i>	95
MALE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS <i>Ismail Mustapa</i>	102



# MALAYSIAN WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS : A Historical Perspective

*Dato' Khoo Kay Kim*

## *Introduction*

**I**t may surprise many to learn that the first Malaysian woman to participate in modern politics was Penang-born Chan Pek Khuan (better known in China as Chen Pei-Chun). Born in about 1888 and educated at the Penang Convent, she became involved in politics after furthering her education in China and Japan. By the turn of the present century, she was an adherent of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement in the process of which she met and married Wang Ching-wei, one of China's leading and very controversial political personalities holding at one time the post of Prime Minister.

While Chan Pek Khuan was embroiled in China's politics, another Chinese woman, Wong Sau Ying, like Chan Pek Khuan, also a Cantonese, was entrusted, in 1925, with the difficult task of assassinating the High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States and Governor of the Straits Settlements—Sir Laurence Guillemard—in Penang. Although not local-born, she also stayed some years in Penang. And it was in Penang that she planned to assassinate Sir Laurence Guillemard.

But she did not have the opportunity and instead went to Kuala Lumpur where she threw a home-made bomb into the Chinese Protectorate, injuring the Protector of Chinese and two of his associates. She was arrested and while in Pudu Gaol hanged herself. She was a member of the Anarchist movement which, as in the case in China, preceded the communist movement (in Malaysia).

Although it is not possible here to provide more examples of individual women actively involved in politics in the inter-War years, it may be assumed that Chan Pek Khuan and Wong Sau Ying are not isolated examples. In Malaysian society, Chinese women were liberated earlier than did Indian or Malay women.

The Eurasian women, however, preceded the Chinese women but more in a social rather than a political sense. Eurasian girls were the first to enrol in English schools and they participated in sports in public much



like their European counterparts. But they did not participate in politics.

Chinese girls were quick to emulate the Eurasian girls. Indeed they were sent to study in Europe by the turn of the present century. These were children of wealthy Chinese families, such as the daughters of Loke Yew and Loke Chow Kit.

Once exposed to modern Western influence, they broke away from tradition rapidly. They rode bicycles, wore Western dresses, cut their hair short, learned modern ballroom dancing, and it is not surprising that, apart from the Eurasian and Ceylon Tamil Christian girls, the Chinese girls were the first to qualify as lawyers and doctors.

Malaysia was already exposed to Western political influence by the turn of the 20th century, primarily because of the arrival of Chinese revolutionaries and reformists such as Dr. Sun Yet-sen and Kang Yu-wei. By and large, the political influence prevalent was leftist in orientation. Or, at least, the leftists were better organised. And political influence was rapidly spread through the Chinese schools. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Chinese school girls participating in the communist movement even before World War II.

Compared to the Chinese, the Malays and Indian were more conservative, socially speaking. The Indians were no less active politically, especially during the inter-War years, responding quite passionately to political movements in India, but within the Indian community, the position of the women was quite clearly subordinated to that of the men.

Still, not a few Indian women became active in various associations. In Malaysia, Indian women began to participate in volunteer associations by the mid-1930s. Two of the more active women at that time were, however, not local-born. They were Mrs. E.A. Davies (of Ceylon origin) in Singapore and Mrs. K.T. Joseph (from India) in Melaka.

Compared to the Indian women, Malay women who participated in public life were even fewer in number. Practically the first to do so was Kontik Kamariah (an active business-woman today) who gained attention when she chaired a public discussion in 1936 or 1937. Not unexpectedly, the more liberated of these women were English-educated. Apart from Kontik Kamariah, mention may also be made of Ibu Zain, Tom binte Dato Abdul Razak and Salmah Ismail (the first Malay doctor) who is still a supporter of the Arts.

But after World War II, Malay women became increasingly active in politics. The 1940s was the era which saw the emergence of radicals such as Shamsiah Fakihi, Khatijah Siden and Zainab Mahmud. Circumstances compelled the Malay society to adopt a more liberal attitude towards the participation of Malay women in politics at that juncture.

It was the announcement and subsequent implementation of the Malayan Union scheme which led to widespread Malay participation in politics. The fear of non-Malay domination and control of the country compelled the Malays to embark on large-scale protests, in the process of which the men urgently needed the support of women. Not surprisingly, many Malay women were involved because their husbands were.

The Indian women for a while, did not lag behind. In fact, they had been exposed to foreign political influence earlier. When war broke out in 1941, the Indian Independence Movement, led by Subhas Chandra Bose, had an important impact on the Indians in Malaysia. When the Japanese overran the country, Chandra Bose established his base in Singapore.

In forming his Indian Independence Army, he formed a special regiment known as the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, specifically for the women. It has been said that one of Chandra Bose's greatest achievements was his success in inducing Indian women in the regiment to wear trousers.

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment was called upon to shoulder the same task as the I.I.A., namely, the re-conquest of India and the women actually marched together with the men to wage war in India. But by the time they reached Burma, the war ended. Among those who joined the regiment were Mrs. Athi Nahappan (now Puan Sri) and Mrs. F.R. Bhupalan.

Chinese women continued to be active in leftist politics. When the Emergency was declared in the middle of 1948, large numbers of them joined the men in the jungle in order to continue their struggle. These were, however, largely products of Chinese schools rather than English schools. Many more, mainly in their teens, continued to support radical politics and among them were children of wealthy parents which prompted Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore in 1959, to remark: "Capitalist parents, communist children" which was a direct reference to girls in secondary Chinese schools.

World War II was an important turning point in the politicisation of Malaysian women. Not that the war created new values and a more open

society but in their struggle to achieve their political goals, the men found it necessary to mobilise the support of the women. Basically, political leadership continued to be provided by men. And, therefore, within UMNO, for example, a Kaum Ibu section was formed so that women could lend their support to the UMNO cause.

Even within the Chinese community where women had been more liberated, few women played a major leadership role in the existing political parties. Apart from Chinese schools, all the other schools were careful not to disseminate political ideologies. Indeed, apart from the teaching profession, not many women were given the opportunity to play an important role in either the public or the private sector. Only a handful of women, such as Mrs. Loke Yew, actually headed large business organisations, although that is not to say that Chinese women did not have the opportunity to influence decisions. In general, they were inclined to stay in the background rather than function in the eyes of the public.

In the case of Indian women, it is somewhat surprising that despite their active, one might even say militant, involvement in the Indian Independence Movement, their role in the political activities of the Indian community, later, was conspicuously absent. No Indian woman was in the forefront of the Malayan Indian Congress, founded in August 1946. And in the several years which ensued only Mrs. John Thivy appears to have attracted public attention when she became involved in Indian politics in Singapore in 1948.

John Thivy, although local-born, and founder-President of the Malayan Indian Congress, had left the country and settled down in India by 1947. He returned as the Indian Agent (representative of the Government of India) and his wife, proper speaking, was then an alien. Her participation in local Indian politics, not surprisingly, was widely resented.

In general, even in the late 1940s, Malaysian women did not appear to be informed on the subject of politics. The society's perception of women had not radically changed. Although it was increasingly common for parents to send their daughters to school and female participation in sports was, especially among Chinese and Indians, no longer so vehemently opposed by the community at large, politics was a different proposition altogether.

Fortunately for the women, the politicisation of the society as a whole continued unabated between the early post-World War II years and the early 1950s. In the years which ensued after the end of the war, there was

general optimism that self-government would be introduced. Various segments of the population had high expectations that elections would be carried out and women would be given the same opportunity to vote as men. Their numerical strength, therefore, could not be dispensed with.

Although the introduction of the Federation of Malaya Constitution proved to be generally disappointing for those who subscribed to more progressive ideas, interest in politics in Malaysia did not decline because the process of decolonisation was progressing steadily in various parts of the world and, in Malaysia itself, talks of the country achieving independence were in the air. By 1951, UMNO had changed its slogan from "Hidup Melayu" to "Merdeka". The leftist parties were uncompromising in their demand for at least immediate self-government.

By late 1951, local government elections had been introduced. This was quite clearly the prelude to elections at the "national" level. This ensured that the women would not be discounted in the strategy of any political organisation which had high political aspirations.

Nevertheless, few of them were given a prominent place in the leadership of the existing political organisations. One of the prominent ones was Saleha binte Mohd. Ali (sister-in-law of Malaysia's present Prime Minister) who was the only lady in the organising committee of the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) during its formative years. IMP, it may be remembered, was founded by Dato Onn Jaafar after he left UMNO in mid-1951 because UMNO members turned down his plea that the United Malay National Organisation should be changed to the United Malayan National Organisation.

But, irrespective of what society thought, the tide could not be turned back as the country marched towards independence. Hardly four years after local government elections had been introduced, the country embarked on the first country-wide elections, based on universal suffrage. For every political party contesting the elections, every vote counted and, therefore, in their campaigns, all segments of the society were courted by the candidates.

Consciousness of the forthcoming elections was drummed up by the mass media. Public rallies were held in urban as well as rural areas. Party workers included both men and women. Malaysian society was still conservative; hence, women workers were needed to campaign among women.

It was, however, still uncommon to see women giving speeches at political rallies and politics was not a common topic of discussion when women gathered in groups. Local understanding of politics was, on the whole, still somewhat elementary. Much of the population remained chary of open political discussions, fearing that views expressed might be construed to be anti-government.

For most Malaysian women, overt and active participation in public affairs was not seen as a duty. Little had been done to instil in them the need to do so. At any rate, mingling between the sexes was largely frowned upon. There were, of course, a small number of women who were less prone to submit to social decorum. Their behaviour was disapproved by both men and women.

Even at the level of the university, few female students ventured to take part in student elections and among public figures often invited to address students on politics, only Han Suyin was the exception; the others were men. Even the brightest of the female students took but a lukewarm interest in the country's political developments.

Society as a whole did not take kindly to politics. There was a general consensus that politics was for the politicians; those who were not politicians should stay aloof, in particular, students. As late as the 1960s, even Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister and Chancellor of the University of Malaya, repeatedly reminded students that their primary duty was "to study".

Politics was seen as something pragmatic, not as part of the pursuit of a more perfect order. Intellectuals offering their views on political issues were constantly told that they were too idealistic. And, therefore, a large proportion of the better-educated stayed away from politics. They sought professions which were deemed to be apolitical.

In the earlier years, those who involved themselves in public and political affairs were mainly lawyers. Later, some doctors also took to politics. But almost all of them were men. Among the early graduates of the University of Malaya, the majority of the men were more interested in a career in the civil service, failing which the teaching profession was the next choice. The women, with rare exceptions, chose to become teachers and possibly none among the graduates of the 1950s became politicians.

But women politicians there were, in Malaysia, by the 1950s most of them were in UMNO. But they were not among those with tertiary

education. In many instances, as mentioned earlier, they were there by virtue of their husbands' involvement. There were exceptions, of course, but until more recently those with high education looked askance at politics, considering it a profession for those who did not have a nobler choice. It was, in a sense, a rough and tumble job, not quite befitting a gentleman, what more a genteel lady.

# GENDER : A Social Factor in Political Consciousness and Active Participation

*Askiah Adam*

## *Introduction*

The title of the paper can be a bit of a conundrum when you are trying to write it. But it does lend itself to two obvious approaches. Firstly, that it is a statement and therefore the assumption is made that gender, i.e., being male or female, determines one's political consciousness and political participation. Or, it could be taken as a question. Here there are no assumptions made and therefore I would be bound to answer the question, if it was meant to be a question. However, there being no question mark at the end of the title, I presumed then that it is a statement. What I would then be required to do was to justify the statement which presumes gender to be a social factor in moulding and determining the level of political consciousness and its consequent activism. What was required of me was some kind of a regression model, a technique of proving something by working backwards.

Starting then from the premise that gender is a social determinant in this respect, the first step would be to understand what it means. Gender, in this context, means the state of being either male or female. Politics, meanwhile, is the complex or aggregate relationships of humans in society, especially those relationships involving authority or power. Therefore, gender determines authority which is the seat of power.

## *The Political Scenario*

The pertinent question then is, who has authority — men or women?

Throughout recorded history we cannot but escape the dominance of men. To some extent it is unfortunate that history is only made by heroes and villains. We know only too well that all of society cannot be either heroes or villains. Those of us who have done the "decent thing" and lived life as we are expected to— i.e., to conform— have had no occasion to cause ripples on the waters of history, let alone make waves. And who could be more conforming than the women who are wives and mothers?

It is impossible to say how the gender division of labour was arrived

at, but women were relegated to the private domesticity of the home and men the public realm. Women are generally those who soothe the raging breasts and smooth the furrowed brows of society. It is no accident that domesticity is synonymous with privacy. What a person does in his/her home is to a very large extent considered private and this privacy is respected. It becomes invisible. And so this social arrangement gives rise to a simple syllogism:

*Domestic life is private and therefore invisible*  
*Women are at the heart of domestic life*  
*Women are therefore invisible*

Consequently, the history of mankind has become men's history because women were housebound, sucked into oblivion by the mire of domesticity. This invisibility brought on powerlessness.

According to John Stuart Mill, the subjection of women stretches as far back as philosophy itself. Women's social status — the incredible possibility of their being equal in ability to men — was discussed in some detail by Plato. That is well over a couple of thousand years ago. That Plato doubted his own ideas of the possibility of treating women as equals, that giving them the same opportunity at excellence was preposterous, ipso facto suggests that women even then were not their men's equals.

But, nonetheless, the history of the Western World, and the world at large, has witnessed the regular intrusions of great women figures whose contributions were quite extensive. Despite this, all manner of prejudices deriving from the notion that women are naturally inferior to men persists. Even the renowned French philosopher, much lauded as a democrat, Jean Jacques Rousseau, had reasoned that this is how women should be — subject to men!

This subjection of women to men, or more bluntly the oppression of women, according to Sheila Rowbotham is quite unique, quite unlike the oppression of other social groups.

"Women are not the same as other oppressed groups. Unlike the working classes, who have no need for the capitalist under socialism, the liberation of women does not mean that men will be eliminated." (Women's Consciousness, Man's World; 1979)

This inextricability between women and men in an unequal relationship is maintained by pervasive and persistent socio-cultural myths. For



example, unmarried women are often viewed as sexual failures with, not unusual, inferences of immorality. Consequently we find that women, with the connivance of society, mould their aspirations around marriage, husband and unavoidably, family. She homes in on so-called feminine qualities and female virtues of kindness and gentleness, and hones it to perfection. It is these female virtues that are generally accepted by society as the nature of women. Yet, John Stuart Mill (1986) argues that:

*"What is now called nature of women is an eminently artificial thing - the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. It may be asserted, without scruple, that no other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relations with their master ..." (On The Subjection of Women)*

The unequal power relationship "distorts" a woman's character so that she may be "trapped" in this very unequal power relationship — in marriage.

But, what perplexes Mill is why the institution of marriage is not more amenable.

*"Marriage being the destination appointed by society for women... one might have supposed that everything would have been done to make this condition as eligible to them as possible, that they might have no cause to regret being denied the option of any other. Society, however... has preferred to attain its object by foul rather than fair means ... the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband..." (On The Subjection of Women)*

While things have improved since the 19th century, it is still a wonder why women do not withdraw from a power structure that continues not to favour them.

### *Local Influences on Women*

Culture is rather closely intertwined with religion. And a close study of women's status in society will indicate that religio-cultural beliefs maintain and reinforce the idea of women's less-than-equal position.

Malaysia is favoured with a colourful religio-cultural mosaic. Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, coexist to influence their followers and adherents. Although its rituals add magic to our lives, its

doctrinal beliefs tend towards the subjection of women.

However, within the Malay world, it is often argued that the *adat* or customary practices is non-sexist, that Malay women generally are given better rights by the *adat*. [Note that it is better rights and not equal rights!] However, the gender power configuration in *adat*, while giving women certain economic rights with their attendant duties, provides women with few other, what is generally held currently as basic human rights.

Even in the matrilineal system of the Minangkabaus, one finds that it falls far short of giving women the right to self-determination. The matrilineal clan gives rise to the impression that women form the focal point in this extended family based socio-cultural system. The matrilineal hereditary system further strengthens this notion. But do Minangkabau women wield real power?

One school of thought perceives of it as a matriarchy, arguing that women's ownership rights over land, the economic mainstay of the system, is very significant. This economic "stranglehold", it argues, subjects the men to the rule of the womenfolk. And yet, the men are the ones who hold all ceremonial titles and customary offices of the clans and the nation. Men it is, who confer with men of other clans regarding inter-clan affairs. And, because marriage is exogamous, the responsibility of finding a husband for a female member of the family lies with the mother's brother. A woman in not only being denied sexual self-determination, she is not left to remain unmarried. The following maxim regarding the use of the clans' wealth known as *harta pusaka tinggi* clearly illustrates the importance of finding every Minangkabau woman a husband.

*"Rumah gadang kebocoran  
gadis besar belum bersuami  
mayat terbujur di tengah rumah  
pembangkit batang terendam"*

[The main house is leaking  
the big girl is yet unmarried  
the corpse lies at the centre of the house  
the submerged, awaiting for the raise]

If one can assume that this is the order of priority then obviously a woman's marital situation is of the utmost concern.

From this it is arguably safe to suggest that the *adat* is patriarchal in its

gender political relations, which is only slightly blunted by the arrangement of conferring with the matriarch of the family.

One other customary practice that further indicates the pervasiveness of patriarchy even in a matrilineal system is the act of *merantau* or of travelling abroad. Only the men perform this self-enriching, clan-enriching practice. Why not the women?

In fact the Minangkabau tradition is being threatened by economic development. The lessening dependence on land for economic sustenance has freed the system to move still nearer to patrilineality and patriarchalism.

### *The Malaysian Political Scenario*

Women form just over 49 percent of the population of Malaysia which, according to the preliminary figures from the latest census, is about 17.5 million. More than 80 percent of those above the age of 21 are registered voters. Of these about 88 percent voted in the 1986 Parliamentary elections, just over 80 percent voted in the 1986 elections, and 86 percent went to polls in the 1990 elections. However, only 65 percent of Malaysians over 21 voted in 1982, less than 65 percent in 1986, and this figure remained constant for the 1992 elections. Unfortunately, no gender disaggregated figures are available. However, from these figures we can infer that about 20 percent of all eligible voters are politically apathetic, which is large for a nation that practises representative democracy.

There is no way of telling how much of this apathetic group is made up of women. If education is a factor influencing political consciousness, then from the school enrolment figures available, there is little reason to believe that women will be any less conscious or conscientious, for that matter. The percentage of enrolment for both boys and girls are about equal, evenly balanced, i.e. around the 50 percent mark. This pattern of enrolment is followed through to the tertiary level.

However, from the figures for enrolment in Secondary Vocational Schools, the very lopsided distribution favouring male students may indicate certain gender biases. Figures for the eighties demonstrate a growing disinclination amongst girls to enrol in Secondary vocational schools<sup>1</sup>. These gender biases may be better gleaned from the distribution of students at the tertiary level by sex and courses. From figures available in the Social Statistics Bulletin, it is possible to discern the traditional biases where male students appear to prefer the sciences, while female students

seem to have greater affinity for the humanities and arts. Even in the sciences, the female students are mostly pursuing a course in medicine while the male students opt to do engineering. Such sex ghettos in education reflect a society suffering from certain stereotypical gender biases.

When looking at employment, there is a striking dissonance between the number of employed males and females. Despite there being an almost equal number of males and females in the population, the number of employed females is only about a third of the total employed persons. And of the women between the working ages of 15 to 64, only 47.8 percent of them were in the work force in 1990. The female labour force participation rate has not changed much in the 1980s despite the burgeoning economy, especially in the economic recovery in the late 1980s. From the survey done amongst women who are outside the labour force, a substantial number gave household obligations as their reason for not seeking employment. This remains a significant factor if one looks at the Malaysian Social Statistics Bulletins. A large number of Malaysian women, therefore, still see their role as housewives.

It is often argued that work expands the mind and the mental horizons of the individual. A person learns to socialise in a wider sense. This, according to this school of thought, brings about greater awareness of the world outside the home. But, according to the figures for trade union membership, the number of women members lags far behind that of men. The Department of Manpower puts the number of women union members for 1980 at 136.4 thousand, and by 1989 this number had increased to 178.2 thousand. Meanwhile, the number of men trades union members throughout the eighties averaged at approximately 400 thousand. While reflecting the smaller number of women workers, and some of the problems of unionisation in certain industries, the small number of unionised female workers must also be an indication of the lack of greater awareness amongst most female workers. It is true that even amongst male workers the proportion of unionised labour is less than 10 percent, but for the female workers the proportion of total women employed who are unionised is only about 5 percent or less.

The statistics are no better in the higher echelons of society. While women make up almost half of the population, in a system of representative democracy less than one-fifth of the parliamentary seats are filled by women. Furthermore, there are only two women Ministers despite each constituent party of the ruling coalition having women's wings.

In the upper levels of the bureaucracy too, women are under-represented. Almost the same number of female and male students graduate from the local universities every year. And a high proportion of the women stay in work despite family commitments. Yet their professional progress in the public and private sector is very limited.

### *The Feminist Argument*

Firstly, there is what is sometimes referred to as the "Tender Trap" — mothering. While a great deal is said about the joys of bringing up children, the warmth of putting a new born to the breast, very little is spoken of the exhausted mother, the mother who is going through a post-natal depression. Singing in praise of motherhood, in celebration of the nuclear family in this day and age, is singing in praise of the superwoman. For those women who fall short of this superwoman image there is a sense of failure, a loss of self-esteem. Motherhood can be demoralising.

In its present form it is proscribed by patriarchy, it is isolating and soul-destroying. Men do fulfilling work away from the anarchy of raising a young family. As a waged worker, his worth is generally recognised by the system. A housewife is invisible and lost to the system that only knows how to enumerate in dollars and cents.

What of the woman worker whose work is never done? No matter that she services the modern or the traditional sector, a woman worker does not come home to a wife. She is the wife who will now pick up the drudgery of domesticity after a full day at work. How can this woman maintain her energy to bring about greater awareness? Where does she find the time to reflect or even meet with others to discuss the wider world?

What of her freedom from violence? Though the situation is fast improving all over the world, women's freedom is still very much proscribed by the violence that is so prevalent in a patriarchy that does not recognise women as persons but merely as objects of sexual desire. Often it is argued that women bring violence upon themselves. Rape victims are provocative. However, statistics in the West suggests that less than half were raped by total strangers. Most rapist know their victims. Therefore, such restrictions imposed on women informally, like not going out at night, not to go about alone, not to dress in anything other than conservative outfits, are but ruses. Women are subject to violence because their persons are not respected.

But yet most women do not see feminism as their rallying call!

Feminists generally subscribe to seven principles. They are:-

- equal pay must be given equal value
- all women should have opportunities equal to those of men regardless of class, age, handicap or sexual preference
- all women have a right to legal and financial independence
- women have a right to decide whether or not to have sexual relationships, and the forms that their sexual involvements will take
- all women should be able to live without fear, attack, sexual abuse or harassment, battering, incest or rape
- 'personal is political' which means that private feelings must be incorporated into political change and struggle: the bedroom is as political as the boardroom, and both need to be transformed
- 'men must change too': men have a responsibility for altering themselves in order to ensure that they do not perpetuate their domination of women

### *Conclusion*

That women's representation at every level of decision making is so minimal suggests the necessity for greater awareness amongst women. This in spite of their equal status that has been written into the Constitution. Nevertheless, women in Malaysia appear content with their lot. If feminism in the West is rejected by a large number of women themselves, in Malaysia feminism has not taken off at all.

It is possible that by looking at the reasons for the rejection of feminism in the West, as itemised by the New Internationalist, we may stumble across the reasons for the seemingly insubstantial political awareness amongst Malaysian women of their rights. This list of reasons is reproduced below with arguments to rebut its charges.

- **Many women and men feel that claims that women are unfairly treated by men are not generally true. It argues that some women do very well while some men do awfully badly. Why then should there be agitation only for women's increased well-being?**  
This argument glosses over the very real injustice towards women that do exist.
- **Women's inequality is a natural phenomenon**

Having children may indeed limit a woman's possibilities but this is not her fault. Things can be planned to make it possible for women to fulfill their potential even when they have children.

Most women may generally be weaker than most men but things are made systematically harder for women than for men in the same position and with identical abilities. Women are discriminated against.

- **Men do not make it harder for women**

No doubt there are many men who are good and supportive, but violence against women that does occur suggests otherwise. Laws are needed to take care of these bad elements amongst the men.

- **Women can become Prime Ministers if they want to**

At the highly formalised level this may be true, but there are still hidden agendas. Different things are thought proper for men and women as such. In order to get public approval, there still exist many situations in which the sexes have to behave differently.

- **Women can do anything they want now, such as having both family and work at the same time**

But the question is can she do it without making unnatural sacrifices which men do not have to do? Or will a man be allowed to become a house husband without others sneering at him?

- **Whatever advantages men have, women have others**

While this is partly true, social sanctions, if not institutional sanctions, give more power to men. There is no equality in differences.

- **The man's role which carries with it power and status is burdened with responsibilities. In the modern world of liberated women this is no advantage**

If men do find the male role burdensome then they should embrace feminism. But seeing as most men wish to retain this man's role, it would not be unfair to assume that it is not as burdensome as they make it out to be. It might even be quite pleasureable!

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### *Endnotes*

1. Ministry of Education records show that in 1980, 30.4% of secondary vocational school pupils were girls. By 1989 the percentage had dropped to 22.6%.

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*Ms Askiah Adam is the Research Analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia. She obtained her M.A. in Philosophy from the United Kingdom. From 1987 to 1991, she worked as a producer, journalist and broadcaster at the British Broadcasting Corporation, London. She has authored and edited several books.*



# WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND FEMALE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN GERMANY : A Case for Comparison

*Robert Haas*

## *Introduction*

Politics as the way how public affairs are handled, is based on certain ideas and theories, but put into action by people. Not the ideas, but the acting people decide in the final analysis how our countries are governed. The importance of how these actors come into their position and what kind they are cannot be overestimated. In this context it is remarkable to realise, that traditionally women were more or less excluded from the political game. The players were men, with women providing little or no direct input into the system, though being fully submitted to the output. In order to enable women to communicate their own ideas and to transfer their demands into political activities, they have increasingly organised themselves, trying to change the legal system as well as structures of thinking and behaviour, which they consider as being responsible for the situation.

This process is still ongoing all over the world, but especially in many parts of the developing world the pertinent struggle is far from being won. Therefore, not only the individual rights of women are neglected, but also insufficient use is made of their ability to contribute to development.

In a situation like this, it may be helpful to study cases for comparison. If women's affairs are treated only as domestic politics, there are two closely related dangers: one can get lost in petty local peculiarities, i.e., become unaware of the more important general problems and tendencies, or one tends to see certain national problems as exceptional and negligible, which in reality are structural gender problems which may occur anywhere. Both can result in wrong conclusions and decisions. Therefore, reading of experiences in another country may be an eye-opener. Even when differences in certain aspects seem to be great, the information which is available should provoke fruitful discussions and criticism.

This article provides some facts and arguments. The comparison mentioned in the title will have to come from the readers who are familiar with their local situation.

## *History*

### *Time before 1945*

The struggle to improve the condition of women in Germany has a long history but it did not materialise for a long time. Renaissance and the period of enlightenment laid the foundation to free the minds of scholastic constraints which the Church had imposed on them. But the autonomy of man was taken so seriously as "man"-oriented that promoting the liberties and rights of women did not occur to most writers of those times. So the women's movement can only be considered as a rather belated child of the ideas of enlightenment.

Not until the 1840s was the question of a political role for women brought up seriously. In the years preceding the liberal revolution of 1848, the general atmosphere had become increasingly politicised and the call for enhanced civil rights was loud. This enabled early women leaders like Louise Otto-Peters (1819-1895) to encourage women getting interested in political affairs and to raise the popular demand that democratic rights should include women, too.

The 1848 revolution, which in the beginning was successful, led to the formation of many political clubs, the forerunners of political parties. They, however, restricted membership to men only. Voting rights for the first German National Assembly in the St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt also were limited to men only. Women were given only 200 seats as spectators. Arising out of these developments, women in various parts of Germany formed their own clubs, attracting big membership, e.g., in the medium-sized town of Mainz alone, 1,700 women joined a club there. Also the first political oriented newspapers for women were published.

After reactionary monarchical forces had regained full control of politics in 1850, Societies' Acts were proclaimed, which explicitly stated that political associations were not allowed to enrol "students who are still at school, apprentices, and women". They were also not allowed to participate in political meetings. These acts symbolised the attitude prevailing at that time that women had immature minds, thereby disqualifying them from political activities as if they were minors.

This, however, could not silence them. In 1865, the first All Women's Conference took place in Leipzig. It led to the formation of the "Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein" (General German Women's Association), which was non-partisan and non-religious, and asked for the rights of women to participate in the country's affairs.

Other associations for women followed and in 1894 a pertinent federation was installed, which in 1914 represented some 500,000 individual members. It should be mentioned that, apart from this secular oriented federation, there were also other important associations which had a religious basis. - The notorious Societies Acts in the various German states were gradually liberalised making way for women to become more active.

In 1902 was founded the "German Association for Women's Suffrage" and from 1908 onwards parties were allowed to recruit women members, but they were not eligible to vote until the monarchy was abolished in 1918.

There had always existed voices claiming that only a minority of radical women was really interested in political participation. They were proved wrong, when in 1919, in the first general election of the new German Republic, 90% of the women voted. In the newly elected Parliament 10% were women. The topics these pioneer women politicians showed an interest in during their time in parliament were far away from being revolutionary, but concentrated mainly on the classical female issues like social, education and health affairs.

In 1933, the National Socialist Party under Adolf Hitler came into power with an attitude totally different from that of the previous Weimar Republic which had been based on a liberal constitution. The National-Socialists wanted to "emancipate women from women's emancipation". While for them the male was responsible for the "big world", i.e., struggling to earn a living for the family, participating in the general political affairs (as far as it was still allowed) etc., the woman was in charge of the "small world", supporting and strengthening the male when he came home, educating the children, looking after the home, etc. The family was defined as the germ cell of the state and that was where the woman belonged to. She was seen, in contrast to the more active and outgoing male, as one characterised by emotion, devotion and motherliness, so her role was subordinate and submissive to the male.

Most existing independent female organisations were banned, especially those with the slightest political tone. Instead, state and party-organised women at all levels in their own institutions geared to support the prevailing ideology, i.e., to educate women in national-socialist thinking and to safeguard total integration into the system. Women were restricted to the promotion of youth and welfare work and recruitment of new members for the party. A political career in the widest sense was only possible within the hierarchy of the pertinent associations.

Married women were discouraged to remain in, or to take up, employment. For example, there were regulations allowing female civil servants to be dismissed when they married. It can be called an irony of history that during the Second World War women in unprecedented numbers were forced to take over even the toughest male jobs, as the men were out fighting. Thus women played a much greater role than anticipated. So the Nazi politics itself destroyed the basis of a core element of its own ideology.

### *Development in post war Germany*

After the war the situation changed again completely. Women's organisations mushroomed and accelerated political calls. They also became popular because of the following list of nine demands, published in 1946:

- Equal rights for women
- Participation in Government
- Equal right to work and equal pay
- Fair women participation in professional bodies
- Incorporation of women's interest into the legal system
- Reformation of family law
- More women in leading positions and in education
- Greater recognition of women's work
- Active participation of women in civic life.

Proposed by a woman member of the Constituent Assembly and accepted against strong opposition, the Constitution of 1949 stated explicitly: "Men and women have equal rights". It also obliged Parliament to repeal until 1953 all older laws, which ran contrary to this principle. The latter was especially important as there existed many regulations, especially in civil law, which were based on the patriarchal thinking of the 19th century. For example, previous laws allowed a man as the head of the family to make important decisions singly, even against the will of his wife.

There were long discussions on how to change this law and one strongly-supported proposal said that though both parties should try to agree on all matters regarding marriage, in case of disputes the husband would have the casting vote. The argument was that different from public society, the idea of democracy was alien to the principles of marriage and family. Their functioning were dependent on integration through authority.

A famous legal scholar (E.W. Bosch) put it in the words: "The alternative is either Hierarchy or Anarchy". This school of thinking, however, was finally rejected and both parties now enjoy equality in making decisions. The chaos which conservatives had predicted would follow did not happen. It turned out that couples did not need legal regulations to guide them in the way how they should make decisions for themselves.

In several other cases, it became necessary to appeal to the Constitutional Court to remove regulations giving women unfair treatment. There was, for example, the case when Parliament omitted to safeguard mothers, especially in the field of education, to have the same rights as the fathers to make decisions on their children's education. The Constitutional Court rectified this.

The 1953 deadline set for the adaptation of law to the constitutional demand for equal rights, however, was not achieved. It took much longer to carry out this reform. Here are some key events of the process for enhanced rights for women which also illustrate what the main topics of discussion were:

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1952 | Act for the protection of working mothers, which regulated the type of work employers could ask pregnant women to do and how much leave they had to provide in connection with pregnancy and birth (was improved later several times). |
| 1957 | Act awarding women equal rights in the family.   |
| 1961 | Single mothers given guardianship of their children.   |
| 1969 | Nationality Act changed: Foreign women and men get equal rights to claim German nationality when they are married to Germans.  |
| 1970 | Single women automatically get tutelage over their children.   |
| 1972 | Housewives become eligible for pension scheme on a voluntary basis.  |
| 1975 | Children of German women married to foreigners automatically get German citizenship (as already was the case for children of German males married to foreign women).   |
| 1976 | While previously the surname of a male automatically became  |

the family name for both man and wife, they now can also choose the wife's maiden name. (Further amended in 1993: Men and women can, if they wish, both keep their birth names, but must agree on a family name for the children).

- 1977 Introduction of partnership principle in family law: Law does not differentiate anymore the prescribed role model for who is in charge of what in a marriage.
- Reform of the divorce law: The court does not have to decide anymore who is guilty for the break up, but divorce is granted by stating that the marriage is ruined beyond repair. The regular support that men or women (!) have to pay to their previous partners, therefore, is also no longer dependent on guilt but only on the needs of the financially weaker partner.
- 1980 Act on equal treatment of men and women at the working place.
- 1984 Creation of a government sponsored agency which financially assists pregnant women who are in need.
- 1986 Women having children awarded recognition of one extra year per child in the pension scheme without contributing for it.
- 1986/8 All mothers (or fathers) looking after their newborn children get financial support of DM600 (RM900) monthly for 18 months after delivery irrespective of whether they were in employment before or not.
- 1993 On deciding upon the appeal against a new law which allows, under certain circumstances, abortions during the first three months of pregnancy, the Constitutional Court states that the law is in principle in accordance with the constitution. But it insists on clarifying that abortions are still disapproved and can only be carried out when the woman first undergoes intensive counselling by a recognised independent institution to try to convince her that she should have the child.

The reform of women's rights was initiated and driven forward by women politicians and enlightened male colleagues, both led by very pragmatic attitudes towards analysis and improvement of the situation. It took long to achieve the aims as the new clause on equality in the constitution of 1949 did not change automatically the attitudes of the

people. They, as a majority, had grown up with different ideas. But new generations with other experiences and attitudes gradually took over. Opponents to these reforms who were convinced of a religious or natural order, whereby women are submitted to men, became less and less. While in the early years after the war, conservative politicians still quoted from the Bible in order to prevent women from seeking more rights, this attitude disappeared gradually over the years. This was eased by the fact that a great part of the theologians themselves denied that it was possible, to deduct legally binding obligations from the words of the bible. They disputed anyhow, that the bible could be understood in a way that it states a superiority of men over women.

The women's movement received new and greater radical impulses in the so-called "Student's Revolt" towards the end of the 1960s. The Marxist-oriented students, however, in practice treated their female counterparts not much better than others, i.e., reducing them to subordinates and bed companions. This resulted in many of the politically-minded women to turn to feminist attitudes. They formed consciousness-raising-groups and women's centers where they met and discussed topics like self-experience, sexuality, women's theatre, self-defense, structures of gender exploitation, etc.

Institutions were created, working or demanding for information, education, self-fulfillment, creation of a feminist anti-culture, politicising, women centers, women publishing houses, research on women, women workshops, houses for the protection of battered women, etc. Many relevant literature was written or translated. Two political and radical magazines for women readers were founded which became quite popular: *Courage* (1976) and *Emma* (1977).

By the end of the 1970s the feminist movement had split into two: one continued to confine itself to women culture and worked in the so-called autonomous women projects. The other entered politics to change the society. This happened through parties, mainly the feminist oriented "Greens", or through rather radical non-governmental organisations like "Women for Peace", "Greenpeace", "Robin Wood", etc.

### *Current Political Situation*

As far as the democratic parties are concerned, they are all strongly committed to further strengthen the role of women. For a foreign audience it does not make sense to go into the details of all the party programmes.

As examples, however, some highlights are given, selecting two parties, the Liberals and the Greens which do not have much in common.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP) is, in coalition with the Christian Democratic Union under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, an important element of the German Government. Its members, hold, for example, ministerial posts in Foreign Affairs (who is also the Deputy Federal Chancellor), Economy, Justice (female minister), Education and Science as well as Housing and Urban Development (woman minister).

The FDP's programmes are based on the classical ideas of European liberalism, which tend to stress the rights of the individual. Therefore, this party always had a strong affinity to those demands, which were pressing for better women's rights.

Some pertinent elements of FDP's political programmes are:

- Removal of obstacles for the employment of women. E.g., there are still laws claiming to protect the poor health of women, thereby, reserving certain jobs for men only. Most of these regulations are outdated and no longer justifiable. They must be replaced by a system of individual protective laws aimed, where necessary, to equally protect men and women. In particular, the principle that female workers should not work at night should be removed if men are allowed to work at these times.
- Equal pay for equal work and removal of other sex related discriminations at the working place.
- Creation of a flexible working system for women that allows easier adoption of work to suit individuals to combine family and work. Reform of training and education facilities so that they are better geared for the needs of women, especially those with children.
- A more just tax system for families.
- Special programmes for the promotion of women's careers.
- The civil service should set an example. It is suggested that a law should be introduced to safeguard equal treatment and equal opportunities for women in civil service. The post of a Federal Commissioner for Women's Affairs is to be created to look after the interests of women in the public service and given powers to bring up discrimination cases.

The FDP is against a fixed quota system and sees competition also for women as an integral part of liberal philosophy. But more efforts are needed to promote women and to qualify them for positions at all levels. The aim



should be that party and political posts held by women at least reflect the share of female membership in the party (25%).

The Green Party entered the political arena only some years ago. It is anti-establishment, attracting mainly idealistic and disappointed members of the younger generation. Their ideals are reflected strongly in the party's programmes, i.e., they are raising strong moral claims, hence may not always be very practical and estimates of the costs for the execution of their proposals often give reason for doubts.

The Green Party, as the most radical among the important political groupings, paints a very bleak picture of the plight of women in Germany. It sees them characterised by a hierarchical structure in which men rule over the discriminated women. Male violence against women is described as a structural problem of patriarchal societies which they find existing everywhere in the modern world. The Greens ask for equal participation of women in all aspects of public life and economy. To achieve this, a quota system is regarded as indispensable. For example, it is demanded that 50% of all jobs be reserved for women, even if there are better qualified men for a position. The Green Party applies this quota system also in the political field, i.e., giving at least 50% of party positions to women. Female membership in this party is considerably less, i.e., 35%.

The right of women's self-determination for the Greens also includes free access for abortions to be paid for from social security funds. All forms of sexuality and living together apart from marriage, including homosexuality should receive equal recognition by the state. Prostitutes, who are seen as the victims of male exploitation, should receive a recognised status in society. It should be noted that apart from these very fundamental ideas, the Greens are also pursuing many practical reforms the micro level.

All parties which are represented in the Federal Parliament have subscribed to the principle that women should be encouraged to increase their share as far as political mandates are concerned. The governing parties, i.e., the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) are against a quota which they consider as being against the idea of gender equality, but they want fair and better chances for able women to succeed in a competition based on merit.

Women should at least be represented according to the share of membership (CDU/CSU: 23%, FDP: 25%). The opposition party Social Democrats (SPD), who have a female membership of 27%, set themselves a target of a 40% quota for women to be achieved in 1998, whereas the

Green party (35% women), as mentioned before, already applies a 50% quota.

The actual share of women members in the German Parliament is demonstrated by the following table for all legislative periods since the Federal Republic was established. The figure for the German Parliament of 1919, when women first became eligible to vote, is added for comparison:

**Table 1**  
**Women Parliamentarians**

Year	Women Parliamentarians (%)
1919	10.0
1949	6.8
1953	8.8
1957	9.2
1961	8.3
1965	6.9
1969	6.6
1972	5.8
1976	7.3
1980	8.5
1983	9.8
1987	15.4
1990	20.7

These figures show that the development of representation by women is not a steady one. Progress came neither automatically nor gradually but in steps and also with severe setbacks. It may be interesting to compare these figures with the pertinent results in the classical democratic country of Great Britain. The share of women in Parliament from 1945 to 1983 was always fluctuating around 3.5%, with 2.7% in 1951 as the lowest and 4.3% in 1974 as the highest result. Then, in 1987 it jumped to 6.3% and in 1992 increased even further to 9.2%. The latter two figures may reflect what the example of a strong and successful woman (Mrs. Thatcher) can achieve. On the other hand, female representation is still much lower than in Germany. A possible explanation may be that in a system of proportional election system, whereby a party's strength in Parliament derives from the votes party lists receive, it is easier to include women on positions where they have a chance to be elected.

## *Political Behaviour and Attitudes of Women*

So far discussion has mainly centred on the political activities for female rights and the results they achieved. A very different question arises: what is the actual level of political consciousness and behaviour among the average women?

There are several independent polling institutes active in Germany doing scientific research on all types of political aspects. Fortunately, they do not work only for parties with their understandable interest in secrecy. Opinion polls are commissioned by many different groups and institutions, e.g., magazines, newspapers, and even big companies sometimes like to see their names linked to scientific studies unrelated to their line of business, as a service to the community. To a great extent, polls are also ordered and financed on behalf of the government. The results of these government-initiated investigations, too, are normally made public even if they are not very flattering for government's politics.

Recent studies have yielded interesting details. They also describe differences in attitudes between people from East and West Germany, but in order not to make things overcomplicated, this paper will mainly report on the developments in the former West Germany.

Voting turnout in Germany compared to many other countries has traditionally been high, i.e., close to or even more than 90% of the eligibles actually voted. In the past years, however, there has been a dramatic decrease. The turnouts for the last three general elections were: 1983: 89.1%, 1987: 84.4%, 1990: 78.6%. This is still higher than in the US where roughly only 50% of the population voted, and also more than in my host country, Malaysia where the voting in 1990 was around 70%. What is more important than the absolute figures is the obvious declining trend in voting which moreover is strongest among the younger voters, i.e., those below 35 years of age. The reasons for this phenomenon, which is called "Politikverdrossenheit" (annoyance with politics) are under dispute. I do not want to go into details on that question, but rather describe the particular findings which relate to women.

In general, the difference in turnout between men and women is minimal, in some age groups only between 0.1 - 0.2%. Similar to the highest and the lowest age groups, the difference is somehow greater: 3% more young men between 18-21 years go to voting than women (i.e., 66.3% compared to 63.1%) and this difference is even 10% for persons over 70 years (81.3% as compared to 71.3%).

The following table shows that women's interest in the general elections is lower than the general public:

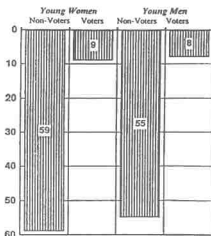
**Table 2**  
**Interest in General Elections**

	Total Population Age Groups			
	18-29 %	30-44 %	45-59 %	60 and older %
Strong interest	35	40	42	35
Normal interest	48	49	47	50
Less interest	17	11	11	15
	100	100	100	100
	Women Age Groups			
	18-29 %	30-44 %	45-59 %	60 and older %
Strong interest	30	34	33	28
Normal interest	51	53	52	53
Less interest	19	13	15	19
	100	100	100	100

On studying the attitudes of those who voted and those who did not, it becomes very clear that those who have less interest in the elections are also the majority of those who abstain.

It is also clear that the decrease in voting is mainly due to those disinterested in elections, but who nevertheless voted on earlier occasions. Persons interested in politics show a much greater stability in exercising their voting rights than the others. A conclusion, therefore, may be that when you want to have a high turnout at elections you should try to create more political awareness first. It should be mentioned, however, that there is also a small but growing group of politically interested non-voters, mainly among men, for whom it is a conscious decision to abstain, thus demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the existing political set up. Therefore, not in all cases, a lack of interest in elections is the same as low interest in politics.

**Table 3**  
"Less Interest" in Elections (%)



Forty-three percent of the female voters (males: 67%) but only 11% of the female non-voters (23%) say that they are interested in politics. However, still many politically disinterested women go to the polls as their behaviour is stabilised by the fact that families normally go voting together. So when the father or husband decides to vote, the woman also joins who otherwise would have stayed at home if she were living alone.

Though there is still a great difference in political interest between men and women, the changes that happened over the last four decades are much more remarkable, as shown by the following table:

**Table 4**  
**Are you interested in politics?**

	Population over 16 years					
	yes		not very much		not at all	
	men %	women %	men %	women %	men %	women %
1951	46	11	42	39	12	50
1960	50	15	41	46	9	39
1969	56	27	38	50	6	23
1979	64	31	33	51	3	18
1985	65	34	31	51	4	15
1990	65	40	32	48	3	12
1992	59	34	37	51	4	15

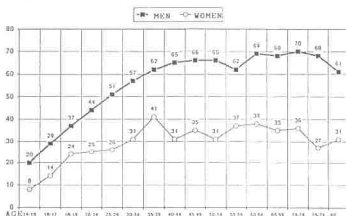
The political interest of women rose from 11% in 1951 to 40% in 1990, but then fell again to 34% in 1992. The number of those women who are not interested in politics at all at present is only 15%, while it was 50% in 1951. For the men, the tendency was similar, though throughout on a higher level of political interest.

The gap between female and male interest which was around 35% in the beginning narrowed to 25% in the end, but is still large and there is no sign that this is going to change in principle, even among the younger generation.

There were hopes that equal changes for education would gradually bridge the gap in political interest, but they did not materialise. It is true that women with better education show a greater interest in politics than others. However, if you compare that with the situation for males, it is evident that the influence of education on political interest is much greater when men are involved: of men under 30 years with low education only 32% are interested in politics, against 61% for those with higher education (29% difference), while the figures for women are 23% and 35% respectively with a difference of only 12%. 79% of the women (against 61% of the men) say that they sometimes find politics being too complicated.

Political interest is not something that comes overnight, but gradually evolves over a period of time, mainly between the ages 14 and 40. As the following table shows, the political interest of women also grows with age, though not as steeply as is the case with men. It attracts attention that

**Table 5**  
**Political Interest of Men and Women in Various Phases of Life**



women's political interest remains rather stable around 25% between ages 20 and 30, while male interest in politics rises from 37% to 51% over the same time span. Female interest in politics rises stronger only over the age of 30 years, but is down again after 40 years.

Also when a closer look is taken at what it actually means when somebody is interested in politics, there are remarkable differences between men and women. It has been tested, e.g., what kind of reports young people between ages 16 and 29 gather from the daily newspapers:

**Table 6**  
**Interest in Newspaper Articles**

	Men %	Women %
Domestic Politics	61	47
Foreign Politics	55	47
Economy	31	11
Technology/Science	35	11
Women's Affairs (fashion, household, education)	3	33
Culture (film, theatre, books, music, art)	24	38

Obviously it is quite different to what many women find interesting as compared to those of men. This divergence in views cannot be without affecting the political attitudes and behaviour.

This does not mean that women do not see the political changes and reforms that influence them directly. 79% of them think, that nowadays they as women have better chances than previously their mothers to push through their own interests. However, only 28% believe that this has made them happier or just more contented than the previous generation was. There seems to be some kind of disillusion about how much increased political and other rights can increase one's satisfaction in life.

Recent trends show scepticism growing among men and women alike towards the competence and wisdom of politicians as well as towards the reliability of actual politics. This is not directed against specific persons or parties alone, but it is a general attitude. For some time the Greens profited strongly from this, as this party claims itself to be an organisation for those who do not go along with the establishment. But in recent opinion polls they are stagnating around 10%, which indicates that they too cannot mobilise people who have lost confidence in politics.

This position also is reflected in the attitudes towards political activity:

In 1971, 66% of the population said they liked men who are politically active. In 1992 this figure went down to 36%. Regarding women, in 1971 62% liked women who entered politics, but only 45% did so in 1992.

Remarkable, however, is the figure in favour of political women which is higher than that for men - a tendency appearing since 1987. It seems that in contrast to the decreasing trustworthiness of politicians, women are able to retain more of their reputation than men.

When women were asked whether they were prepared to join any political party, in 1979, 12% answered 'yes', while 3% were already members. Currently, only 9% answer 'yes' while the membership has not changed. Of the young female voters 80% cannot imagine they would ever join a political party. Here, again, it is different from the men. Only half of the men are against becoming party members. They are also more willing to run as candidates in local elections.

### *Annotations*

The preceding text has two components, which seem to be different from one another: One being a report about events in the field of women's politics and the other containing figures on prevailing attitudes of current women.

This combination represents two spheres: the political activists on the one hand and, on the other, those for whom and in whose name these activities are undertaken.

On the public side, the progress achieved for the German women is impressive. Legal equality has been achieved in nearly all respects. The overwhelming attention, which the recent debate on abortion created among women and in the press, can also be seen as an indication that there are not many more important topics left regarding women's rights. Now that this problem has found a practical solution through legislation and through the above quoted decision by the constitutional court, it has to be seen what the next main subject for women's politics will be.

Very likely interest will shift away from the area of legal discrimination to what is regarded as practical everyday disadvantages of women. There is the interesting observation that, the more fundamental reforms have been carried out, the more important and unbearable appear to be the relatively



smaller pockets of inequality that still exist. One fact, however, is obvious: as compared to the composition of the population women's share in leading positions in nearly all sectors of society is grossly lower.

This also applies to the field of politics. The question is, however, whether this is a blank result of discrimination as some quarters suggest. The available statistical data give reason to be cautious about the discrimination argument. I know that I may receive some very unfriendly comments for what I am going to say now, but if we want to be serious we must see women as they are and not as some groups would like them to be. I.e., on the one hand, it cannot be disputed that women in principle can be as able, competent, interested, active, analytical, gifted or whatever term you may choose, as men. Therefore, the historical attitude to treat them as inferior is baseless.

On the other hand, it should be equally accepted that if you look at greater numbers and averages, actual differences between men and women of today can be realised also outside the physical sphere. Feminists tend to acknowledge these differences only in favour of women, e.g., describing them in relation to men as being more human, feeling, caring, reliable, etc. Even if this should be true, in the political arena we cannot disregard the very different aspect that in spite (or perhaps because?) of all the assets that women have, they are less interested and active in politics than men are. This is not only, as generally assumed, because of their underprivileged status and lack of proper education and opportunities. As we have seen in the statistics, this difference can also be found equally strong among those women who have a good education. There is much theory and speculation about the reasons, but the fact remains and should be considered.

The lower interest of some women in politics is also reflected in their small number in political parties. It can be assumed that this number would be even smaller were it not for the tendency of some men to convince their wives to join the same party as they did. These family members do not tend to become very active, reducing the female activists further.

Taking into consideration the present move in Germany to actively promote greater participation of women in politics, it can be said that an able woman who is really interested in a political career has not smaller but greater chances of success than an equally talented man.

Under these circumstances, I personally have reservations against thinking in quotas as is popular among many women groups and some parties. A quota, on the first glance, seems to strengthen female

representation, but the question may be asked whether it perhaps is more a gain for a relatively small group of activists to increase their share of political power. It would raise doubts whether or how far these quota-women in fact are representing the electorate or rather a group of like-minded people with leverage. It can also be asked whether this really serves the noble aim of equal treatment of women. Anyhow, even among the women themselves, as shown by a 1994 study, only 37% are in favour of a quota.

I would prefer the old fashioned, but solid way of providing equal opportunities for men and women to be pursued also for politics. When competition from different genders results in a decision in favour of the woman, it should be based on free choice and not because of fulfilling a prefixed quota. In a society where legal equality is achieved and, as opinion polls show, prejudices based on gender are dwindling, the insistence of widespread sex discrimination can, in some cases, also be interpreted as trying to create a mood of moral obligation to make good for it, working in favour of the group making allegations.

Providing better and equal opportunities for women also in politics is a task for both men and women. There is still room for further extension of this attitude through education and information, this way i.a. also trying to strengthen female political awareness. But to see politics under a division between male and female group interests which are represented by delegates from these two camps would be a dangerous step in the direction of further fragmentation of society. In a modern world it has become very difficult to justify separate and binding roles according to gender as it is no longer accepted to explain this by simply returning to an asserted natural characteristic. But this also gives room to question whether or not political thinking in gender groups may be outdated as such to a great extent.

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*Dr Robert Haas studied law, politics and sociology at the Universities of Kiel and Hamburg in Germany. He holds a doctorate in law and was an assistant professor and a judge. Since 1980, he has worked for the German Government in the field of development assistance. He was Personal Adviser to the Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism in Swaziland. Since 1991 he has been the Resident Representative of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Malaysia.*

# WOMEN POWER IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL CHANGE: A Potential Resource

*Tan Poo Chang*

## *Introduction*

The role of women in development gained prominence with the proclamation by the United Nations that 1975 be "International Women's Year" and the period 1975-1985 be "United Nations Decade for Women— Equality, Development and Peace". In line with the global development, a number of institutions were created to integrate women into the mainstream of development. The formulation of the National Policy for Women reflects the Government's commitment towards optimising the potential of women in the social and economic development of the nation.

Studies have shown that women's limited access to resources—in terms of education, income, or job opportunities—has had an adverse effect on their ability to influence the allocation of resources in the family and their status in society (Nelson, 1979: 42; Jayaraman, 1957: 134). Even when women have access to such resources, their potential as agents of social and political change is seldom recognised by the women themselves and the society at large.

The political participation of women indicates the extent that their potential have been tapped or are being realised in a country. This would include membership in political parties, during elections, the level of voting, the number standing as candidates or actively campaigning, and the numbers involved in political decision-making, such as in legislative bodies and high government positions, including the Cabinet. The level of participation, however, may differ depending on the ethnic background and other socio-economic variables.

It is therefore necessary not only to analyse the level of political participation but also the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of women in the country to determine their full potential resource in influencing election results and political change. This paper therefore hopes to highlight some avenues where women's potential in the political arena can be improved.

## *Female Political Participation*

Women's status in public life extends beyond participation in political parties and other areas of decision-making. It would, in effect, include legislation providing for the equitable treatment of women, the provision of adequate facilities for girls, the acceptance of women's participation in political life and their representation in the profession and at management levels in commerce and industry (Whyte & Whyte, 1982). This paper will not examine these latter issues (these have been dealt with in other studies. See for example, Tan, 1991; Puthucheary, 1991; Lang & Ong, 1991; Phang, 1991). Instead, the paper will highlight the extent of women's political representation at various levels of decision-making to enable one to understand the untapped potential available with women's full participation.

\* Women's representation makes up less than 50 percent of the members in the major political parties in Malaysia even though they make up about one half of the total population. This is true of all component parties in the Barisan Nasional—UMNO, MIC, MCA and GERAKAN. It is reported that about 44 percent of the 1.8 million UMNO members belong to the women's wing, *Wanita* UMNO. For MIC, female members have been admitted since it was set up and it is estimated that about 40 percent of its 300,000 members are female. The women's wing of MCA, *Wanita* MCA, was set up in 1975 but it started admitting female members much earlier. Currently, it has 180,000 members, that is, 31 percent of MCA's total membership. The majority of the female members are of age 31–40 years. *Wanita* GERAKAN was formed about 11 years ago and in 1992, it had about 35,550 registered members, that is, about 22 percent of its total membership. About 20 percent of the total membership of DAP, one of the opposition parties, are female members. No information is available for the rest of the opposition parties.

The leadership at the grassroots level or in the central decision-making committee is also poorly represented by women. For example, in UMNO, 5 out of the 30 members (17 percent) in the central committee are females and in the 153 divisions, only one is headed by a female; of the 14,000 branches, none comes under the leadership of a female. MCA has three women (8 percent) out of a central committee of 38 members but the most current information on female leaders at the state or division level, is not available because the party election was fairly recent. MIC has only one lady member in the central committee. There are three women in the central committee of GERAKAN and only one division out of a total of 120 divisions is led by a woman. DAP has

two women leaders in the central executive committee.

A low representation of women is also found in Parliament and the State Assembly. A study reported that, in 1988, there were nine women versus 168 male Members of Parliament, and 18 women versus 429 men in the state legislatures (Chin, *New Straits Times*, 10 September 1990). At the end of 1992, out of 180 Members of Parliament, only 11 persons or 6.1 percent were female and, at the level of state assemblies, there were 17 females which represent only 4.8 percent of the total. At present, two out of 24 ministers (or 8 percent) and three out of 21 deputy ministers (or 14 percent) are women.

Male dominance also exists in local government politics where the councillors are appointed (Phang, 1991). It was found that only a small percentage of women have served as councillors in the three local authorities under study. This was attributed to the fact that, generally, women are still playing a secondary role in politics and only a minority are actually active. While many may be capable and able, their passiveness has probably eclipsed their qualities. Subsequently, they have been overlooked and bypassed by the national leaders.

It was found that men do not oppose the participation of women in politics (Phang, 1991). In fact, there has been no deliberate attempt to thwart an increase in the participation of women in local government politics. It would appear that the participation of women in local level politics can only be increased if the women themselves make a concerted effort to become more involved in party activities. However, the indications are that, for a woman to succeed in politics, she probably would have to put in more effort than a man.

Studies (see, for example, Puthucheary & Tan, 1987) and evidence during elections (such as those highlighted by the media) seem to indicate that women come out in full force to vote. One, however, gets the impression that they are not exercising their rights independently or with full knowledge of the political issues involved when they choose their candidates. This is based on some localised studies which have been carried out to assess women's knowledge of political and other issues. For example, a study of rural women in 1986 which was carried out to assess women's knowledge of political and other issues found that some of them did not even know the name of the Prime Minister of Malaysia or the name of the ruling party, or even the name of the state in which they lived (See Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Percentage Distribution of Respondents' Knowledge of**  
**Political Matters by Ethnic Group and Sex**

	Malays		Chinese		Indians	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
<b>Name of the Prime Minister</b>						
Right answer	100.0	81.6	86.4	40.7	87.2	44.8
Wrong answer/do not know	0.0	18.4	13.6	59.3	12.8	55.2
<b>Name of the political party that won the last election</b>						
Right answer*	95.8	68.4	93.2	37.3	78.2	34.5
Wrong answer/do not know	4.2	31.6	6.8	62.7	21.8	65.5
<b>Name of the state in which you live</b>						
Right answer	100.0	92.1	98.3	72.9	90.9	58.6
Wrong answer/do not know	0.0	7.9	1.7	27.1	9.1	41.4

\*Includes those who picked one of the parties in the ruling coalition.

Source: Puthucherry & Tan, 1987

This study further found that compared with the Malays and Chinese, the Indian women are least aware of their rights to select the candidate of their choice. Their low level of education combined with the double burden of work in the estate and in the home probably gave them little time to participate actively in political activities. This is not because they are not members of any organisation. In fact, many of them are members of trade unions (for example, NUPW), MIC or other voluntary organisations. Perhaps, as reflected by their response, many of them do not believe that by participating in various group activities they can influence decisions for themselves or their community (See Table 2).

The degree of political efficacy may explain the level of participation in political activities. Studies of political apathy in the West have shown that there is a tendency for poor people to have a low degree of political efficacy and hence participation because they lack the education and information to understand and deal with political issues (McDill & Ridley, 1962-63).

**Table 2**  
**Respondents' Perception about their Ability to Influence Decisions by**  
**Participating in Organisations by Ethnic Group, Rural Sample**

Responses	Malays %	Chinese %	Indians %
<b>Yes</b>			
A lot	1.3	0.0	1.7
Some/little	14.5	8.5	29.3
<b>No</b>	67.1	22.0	50.0
<b>Not applicable</b> (not members of any organisation)	17.1	69.5	19.0
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Puthucheary & Tan, 1987.

This seems also to be true in Malaysia. It was found that, compared with the Malay or Indian women, rural Chinese women who had the poorest educational level have the lowest political efficacy. About 70 per cent of them did not join any organisation and of those who were members, the majority were not active and did not believe that by joining these organisations they would be able to influence decisions for themselves or their community. Malay women were most likely to join organisations and they were also likely to be active in these organisations compared with the Chinese or Indian women.

It is therefore clear that female political participation is far from satisfactory in Malaysia. This is particularly so in light of the changing socio-economic and demographic profile of the population.

### *Socio-economic and Demographic Profile of the Population*

The percentage and absolute number of voting female population (taken as 20+ because data for 21+ is not available) in Malaysia rose between 1980 and 1990 (See Table 3). They are projected to continue rising such that by the year 2020, the percentage and absolute number of female population aged 20 years and above will increase to 68 percent of the female population or 9,919,000. This implies that the female population will be older due to



increasing life expectancy and declining fertility (that is fewer babies born per women). Proportionally and numerically, there will be more women who will live to fairly old ages who would be able to continue exercising their full potential during election and effecting political change.

**Table 3**  
**Age Distribution of Female Population in Malaysia,**  
**1980, 1990, 2000, 2020**

Age Group	1980		1990		2000		2020	
	Number ( '000)	%	Number ( '000)	%	Number ( '000)	%	Number ( '000)	%
< 20	3447.1	50.5	4077.9	46.3	5245	45.0	4708	32.2
20 +	3384.3	49.5	4732.7	53.7	5995	55.0	9919	67.8
Total	6831.4	100.0	8810.6	100.0	11025	100.0	14627	100.0

Sources: Department of Statistics, 1992; United Nations, 1993

Largely due to the longer life span of women compared with men, the sex ratio<sup>1</sup> at older ages are expected to be less than 100. This means that there will be more women than men at these ages. This has therefore important implications for political parties because the swing of votes in the future is not just based on tapping the potential of women but on issues related to aging.

With that demographic profile in mind, it is relevant to understand the socio-economic profile of these women. Educational level has increased over time such that female education is almost at par with male education. This can be seen in terms of school enrollment at all levels of education. There are also more women pursuing and obtaining higher academic qualifications in a multitude of fields (Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991-1995).

While presently females only account for one third of the labour force, their labour force participation rate is increasing, such that it was 47 percent in 1990. There has been a shift from the traditional and informal sectors to the more modern and industrialised sectors (Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991-1995). Even then, the agricultural sector remains the largest provider of employment opportunities for women, employing 28.2 percent of all female workers in 1990, followed by manufacturing, and community, social and personal services sectors (See Table 4). Women also continue to occupy

the lower job hierarchies, in low-skilled, labour-intensive jobs in the agricultural sector and as production workers in the industrial sector. This scenario, however, is likely to change over time as more and more women pursue and achieve higher levels of education and training. Except for certain occupations in the private sector, women would be able to perform as well as men in terms of earnings as there is hardly any wage disparities between male and female workers (Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991-1995).

**Table 4**  
**Employment Distribution by Industry for**  
**Female Employed Persons, 1970-1990**

Industry	1970 %	1980 %	1990 %
Agriculture & Forestry	67.9	49.3	28.2
Mining & Quarrying	0.7	0.3	0.2
Manufacturing	8.1	16.3	24.3
Electricity, Gas & Water	0.1	0.1	0.1
Construction	0.5	1.0	0.7
Wholesale & Retail Trade, Hotels & Restaurants	5.8	11.2	19.7
Transport, Storage & Communications	0.5	0.7	1.5
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate & Business Services	-	1.6	3.9
Community, Social & Personal Services	16.4	19.5	21.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991-1995

However, entering into wage employment often means that women would have to assume double workload, that of family and work place (Tey, 1991; Puthuchearry & Tan, 1987). Consequently, there are some professionals who had to quit their jobs due to childcare reasons. Provision of facilities such as childcare centres and creches, and sensitising men to share in household responsibilities, are worthwhile areas to pursue to reduce women's workload. Women should also be allowed time to pursue their own interest and development, and to participate more actively in organisations and politics. These changes will, however, take time. Instead, the power that lies in women's hands today cannot be overemphasised for political attention and focus. Women are in the front line for inculcating the desired virtues and values upon the future generations in the country. In the home, the majority of women are responsible for caring and supervising the children (Tey, 1991; Puthuchearry & Tan, 1987). Most women

also participate actively in important family matters and household decision-making. They are therefore the primary agents of socialisation in transmitting traditions, family values and norms to the young.

In the work place, many of them are teachers and nurturers of the younger generations. They are also responsible for organising, leading and participating in many youth, voluntary, social and community activities, and hence there is a wide spectrum of roles and activities in which they can raise political issues and exert some influence.

### *Conclusion*

Women remain a relatively untapped resource in election and political change. Their political apathy is reflected in the low proportion who vote, or who are aware of political issues or who participate actively in political organisations, or occupy high positions in political parties or government. With higher education and greater labour force participation, and ageing of the population, women should now be an important target for political attention and focus. Women themselves should be made aware of the power they have in effecting election results and political change. Women power is extensive because of their many roles and the wide spectrum of activities they are involved in, both at home and at work. They also have the power to convince the men around them—husband, father, brother, son, friend, colleague and charge—of the political issues that affect the family and community.

The need for special tabulations on women in political parties should be given immediate attention. Women power in the political arena can only be tapped through an understanding of the characteristics of the present members to suggest avenues to attract and encourage other new members. Awareness programmes are also necessary to draw women's attention to issues that affect them, and for them to present a united front on such matters. Clearly, the research agenda is very broad in understanding the many issues affecting women including their low participation in politics. Demographic and other socio-economic information in official statistics should, to the extent possible, be tabulated according to gender. Special surveys or census should be carried out to obtain information on the characteristics of members of the electorate and understand their behaviour. This information is most crucial for any election campaign and in ensuring the right person is elected. Most importantly, unless and until women themselves are convinced that their opinion, voice and participation matter in politics, they will continue to

exert little influence in this area. The trickle down effect through these women are indeed tremendous in the political arena. In the not too distant future, with women being better educated and in control of their own resources, increasingly more women will participate actively in politics. Perhaps then, more women will strive and occupy more seats in the upper echelons in politics and government.

### Endnotes

1. The sex ratio is defined as  $\frac{\text{number of males}}{\text{number of females}} \times 100$ .

A sex ratio of 100 means there are equal number of men and women. If the ratio is more than 100, there are more men than women. A sex ratio that is less than 100 indicates more women than men.

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## RELIGION AND CULTURE : Prohibitive Factors for Women's Participation in Politics?

*Salbiah Ahmad*

### *Introduction*

Political participation involves articulating, providing and defending interests. Given this, I am reluctant to limit "participation in politics" to conventional forms of political participation; or to the domain of party politics and representation in Parliament. Women's political participation, includes any process and access to that process which relates to her dignity and well-being as a person in her own right—to develop her full potential as an individual and as a citizen—whether in the family, in the economic sector/workplace, or the society at large.

### *Women as a Disempowered Minority*

There cannot be true democracy when women are excluded from political power, especially not when women comprise at least half of any given population. The development decade which ushered in women's increased economic participation through women-in-development (WID) policies and strategies have nevertheless denied women control over their labour. Economic development does not necessarily translate into political power. In the Third World, women's economic participation in the developmental models have been mainly in free trade zones and tourism.

Malaysia, for example, is the largest exporter of semi-conductors, employing more than one million workers, 80% of whom are women<sup>1</sup>. Out of a total of 10% of unionised workers, women form only 25%. Women in union leadership form 5.2%<sup>2</sup>. There is no minimum wage; workers earn about US\$3 - US\$5 per day. Women work long hours as overtime in order to increase their earnings. They operate night shifts. Yet women remain a minority despite their numbers; they have no political voice and economic control of their labour processes.

### *Family Role Structures Impacting on Women's Political Participation*

Our experiences in the Asia Pacific showed that women's roles in the family

unit have been a major factor in conditioning women and how she has been perceived<sup>3</sup>. The family as a social unit inculcates the values and defines the roles of women and men which permeates the wider societal realm. Women's democratic spaces often determine their democratic spaces.

In the Free Trade Zone situation, her labour is perceived as secondary to that of males and thus comprises reserve labour; her income being considered supplementary. Her work is not as important as the work of males, who are heads of households. This is despite the fact that there are women-headed households.

The family unit has to be seen as a unit with socio economic-political dimensions. A woman in the role of wife and mother is regarded as being mainly responsible for the maintenance of the family unit. Her main task is to provide personal services for family members. Although she is seen as the fundamental member of the family, she is seldom treated as an individual; her rights subsumed by the larger collective rights of the family.

Primarily as wife and mother, she contributes to the economic and social well-being of the family. Yet this contribution may not necessarily match her political participation in this unit. As wife and mother she has been denied control over her own body.

### *Religious and Cultural Values Informing Family Roles*

The family unit which begins by the process of marriage is endorsed by the Qur'an. The Qur'an also explicitly mentions certain terms of intimacy in that relationship; "love and mercy" between spouses, and that husband and wife are "each other's garments".

There is, however, no corresponding term for "role" in the Qur'an. What many Muslims consider the 'proper' roles do not come from the Qur'an or Sunnah. Child-bearing is given prominent mention in the Qur'an and ahadith of the Prophet. That a woman can bear children is necessary for the survival of the human species and is, therefore, important. However to maintain women exclusively in this biological function is necessarily restricting women to only the terms of her biology and not a reflection of the intent in the Qur'an and ahadith<sup>4</sup>.

Muslims tend to assume that biological child-bearing goes together with child-care, nurturing and housekeeping, such that these become a

major responsibility of the wife-mother in the fulfillment of her "role". Mawdudi, a modern-day jurist-politician, whose ideas have a faithful following in Malaysia had occasion to opine that women have limited and conditional freedom in matters other than home science. They should not be encouraged to abandon home-life and its responsibilities to make their lives miserable by running after political, economic, social and other activities, shoulder to shoulder with men<sup>5</sup>.

The Qur'an does not assume child-care as a function of females. In 2 : 233 in a discussion on wet-nursing, the Qur'an states that neither a woman nor a man should be made to suffer because of their affections towards the child. If the parents agree and find it affordable, a child can be sent out to a wet-nurse<sup>6</sup>. Child-care and nurturing are not biological functions; both are acquired skills.

Another verse which is often misunderstood and is cited as defining roles for women and men is 4 : 34. The verse establishes that men are *qawwamuna* (have responsibility) over women. This verse has been usually interpreted as "men are superior to women". The responsibility in 4 : 34 entails the provision of a material nature to women in a restricted social context (child-bearing). Responsibility does not mean superiority. It does not mean that women are incapable of handling their own affairs<sup>7</sup>.

It is also equally important for men not to falsely believe that they are inherently the better gender, without exerting any effort on their part. They might then not want to strive to develop the level of *taqwa* (God-conscious) necessary in the sight of Allah swt<sup>8</sup>.

### *Women's Spaces, Women's Work*

The overemphasis on the material portion of *qiwaamah* together with defining woman exclusively in biological terms (with the bearer-carer implications) established a convention that men go out to maintain the family, and women stayed home.

The reality of women's lives in the family shows that women perform varied tasks. In traditional Malaysian society for instance, women work in the fields and work on traditional crafts-weaving of mats and cloth. These are not acknowledged as real contributions to "bread-winning". They are relegated as "women's work"; secondary and supplemental. As Malaysian society becomes urbanised, women are moving away from traditional work. Much of the work outside the family are in the service



sectors—an extension to women's traditional domestic roles; women's work albeit in the public sector. The general acceptance of women in the public sphere is conditioned upon their remaining in jobs which are subordinate or instrumental to men.

### *Leadership Roles and Religious Perceptions*

Wherever she is, in the private or public sphere, her access to decision making and hence political participation is limited, either due to the work being "women's work" and thus subordinate, or that as women performing "male tasks", they are nevertheless not "heads of households" and should not take the lead.

That women should not assume public roles in leadership has been attributed to interpretations of *qiwamah* in 4: 34. As stated earlier, *qiwamah* imports a restricted responsibility of men over women in a particular context. It does not mean that women are incapable of having leadership roles, whether among women, men and women, or even nations as has been assumed<sup>70</sup>. The Qur'an verse 2: 282 is also often quoted allegedly to show the moral and intellectual incapacity of women. The verse 2: 282 relates to the necessity of putting in writing a loan agreement and the calling of witnesses thereto. It states that if two men are not available, then a man and two women from among them shall be witnesses, so that if one of them should make a mistake, the other could remind.

The socio-historical context of the time of revelation of this verse showed that women were not familiar with business and financial transactions. Even Khadijah, the wife of the Prophet, left the charge of her business affairs to him. To ensure justice, two women are required for the following purpose: If the women witness errs or forgets, the other is needed, not to give evidence, but to remind her.

The other source is a hadith related by Abu Bakar, as follows:

*When the news reached the Prophet that the Iranians had made the daughter of Chosroe their ruler he observed: that a nation can never prosper which has assigned its reign to a woman.*

The hadith was first narrated during the Battle of the Camel where Ayesha led her forces into Basrah. Her forces (which reportedly included Abu Bakar) were defeated. Many believers died. Modern day commentators view this hadith as a fabricated hadith. If it had been a

hadith of the Prophet, Abu Bakar would have obeyed the injunction and would have repented and corrected his stand in not going to battle under Ayesha's banner. The other explanation may be that the report was in the nature of a *khabar* or information<sup>10</sup>.

To those who have utilised this hadith for the proposition that a woman should not hold leadership positions, they have also used a statement attributed to Ayesha as saying:

*It would be more to my liking had I remained in my house and not gone to the expedition to Basrah ....*

If she had made this statement, it could be attributed to the fact that she had regretted the loss of so many lives, including some of her nearest and dearest, and to the loss of her own prestige and not necessarily that she was not supposed to lead<sup>11</sup>.

The Qur'an in its singular example of excellent leadership cites a woman—Bilqis, Queen of Sheba. The Qur'an does not use any term, subtle or direct that implies that this position is inappropriate for her, or any other woman. Bilqis's qualities were not measured by gender but by:

- her capacity to fulfill the requirements of office
- her political skills
- the purity of her faith
- her independent judgement<sup>12</sup>

### *Strategies and Actions for Increased Political Awareness and Participation*

One of the more urgent and immediate tasks would be the process of democratisation of the family in that women are accorded a greater stake in decision-making. There should be a sharing of caring and nurturing roles. While women have campaigned on slogans—the personal is the political—perhaps it is time for men to realise that the political is personal. There cannot be change for women unless there is a change in the attitudes of men towards women.

The agenda to put women's rights into human rights discourse has been highly successful in the last World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993. The main thrust of this campaign is the promotion of women's issues on a political platform.

Women should be encouraged to exercise the vote independently and vote for their concerns. In Malaysia, an NGO—the Women's Development Collective—has in the last general elections put up and campaigned for women's concerns. They have published a booklet entitled: Questions for our politicians and Manifesto for the 90's. This was used primarily to lobby candidates and voters.

Women's status should constantly be monitored and upgraded. Formal equality in the law does not necessarily accord real equality. Formal equality must necessarily be accompanied by affirmative action.

There must be ratification of current international instruments on women. Malaysia has yet to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

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4. Amina Wadud, *Muslim Family in Facing Current Challenges*. Paper presented at the International Seminar on Human Ecology and Development. UPM-IPR, 1991.
5. Mawdudi, *Status of Women in Islam*, Lahore, 1991.
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7. Sisters in Islam, *Are Women and Men Equal Before Allah?* 1991.
8. Sisters in Islam, *ibid.*
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12. Sisters in Islam, *op.cit.*

## RELIGION AND CULTURE: Prohibitive Factors for Women's Participation in Politics?

*Wu Ming Chu*

### *Introduction*

**W**omen's participation in politics is generally low<sup>1</sup>. In Malaysia, although women have, since independence, enjoyed equal political rights as voters, candidates and holders of political offices, their political participation in governing structure has been far lagging behind their counterpart<sup>2</sup>.

In the case of Chinese women in Malaysia, their participation in political parties is even lower than participation of members of the other races. Membership in the women's section in the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a purely Chinese political party, registers only a mere 30.6% of the total membership of MCA in 1990<sup>3</sup>. Membership in the women's section of Gerakan, a predominantly Chinese political party, is only about 22% of the total membership in 1992<sup>4</sup>. These figures are far lower than the figure of about 40%, for the ratio of female membership in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a Malay political party, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), an Indian political party.

This paper is an attempt to explore whether religion and culture constitute a prohibitive factor for political participation by Chinese women in Malaysia.

### *Women's Status in the Chinese Religio-Cultural Context*

The 1980 population and housing census of Malaysia classifies Malaysian Chinese by religion as follows: Islam 0.2%, Christianity 3.3%, Hinduism 0.1%, Buddhism 55.8%, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religion 38.6%, tribal/folk religion, others 0.2%, and no religion 1.6%.

The high percentage of Buddhists arises from the fact that most Chinese who consider themselves followers of Buddhism actually practise what may be better termed Chinese religion, as the actual followers of the various sects of Buddhism form only a minority<sup>5</sup>. Taking this into account, the followers of Chinese religion may be taken to be between 80% - 90%.

The Chinese religion of the Chinese in Malaysia is a loosely unified belief system, characteristically diffused and syncretic in nature. It is a complex admixture of many beliefs, embracing ancient Chinese beliefs and cult including ancestor worship as its basis, and Buddhist and Taoist doctrines and Confucian teaching as secondary elements<sup>7</sup>.

To the Chinese, religion is a part of culture, which manifests itself in the way of life of the people. Religion as a social institution will fuse itself into the culture of the society, making the culture more complete. The traditional values and ethnic codes in Chinese culture have, for centuries, placed women at a subordinate role and confined them tightly to the family.

Male-domination, female-subordination — This association can be traced to the doctrine of Yi-jing, where male is associated with *qian*, the *yang*, and female with *kun*, the *ying*. *Yang* is the hard and rigid, and *ying* is the soft and flexible. They are opposite but complementary forces of the universe, thus follows the notion of mutual assistance and inseparability of *ying* and *yang* respectively with the strong and the weak. The notion of their mutual complementarity and inseparability is reinterpreted as *yang*, playing the dominating role, while *ying* plays the supporting role. This male-domination female-subordination roles are aptly illustrated in Li-ji, the Book of Propriety; "Man commands woman and woman obeys man, and the principle of husband and wife starts." One of the "three cardinal guides" says that the wife should look up to the husband as her guiding principle.

Male-exterior, female-interior — This male-female relationship has, since ancient days, been fixed by Yi-jing which states: "The right place for the female is the interior, and that for the man is the exterior. That the male and female are rightly placed is the cardinal principle of the universe." The male-exterior, female-interior roles form the basis for confining women to the family and the home, while the outside world is strictly for men. A set of Confucian ethical codes has been established to confine the women to the family, which includes *san-cong* (the three obediences), *si-de* (the four virtues), *qi-chu* (the seven grounds for divorcing wives).

The woman is also expected to shoulder the duty of filial piety. Thus in the family she is to perpetuate the patriarchal lineage, to assist the husband and educate the son, to serve and attend upon the parents of the husband, and to look after the entire household chores.

Confucian moral codes also look upon a woman's chastity as a crucial element to the harmony in the family. "To starve to death is a small matter,

to lose chastity is a serious matter." Complete seclusion of the women from the outside world, and the cruel practice of foot-binding are ways to enforce the moral ideal of female chastity.

Another deeply rooted notion on the inferiority of women is: "only the untalented woman is virtuous". This has led to the widespread practice of not providing education to women.

Traditionally, the Chinese religion, being a part of secular social institutions, lacks an independent ethical position of its own. Its chief function lies in furnishing supernatural support to ethical values in the basic concepts of the secular institutions. It, therefore, functions as a part of the traditional moral order, and tries to enforce moral standards and to promote moral ideals\*.

The concepts of reincarnation, karma and retribution in Buddhism, and the concept of pre-determined fate from the ancient folk belief are utilised to maintain sexual inequality, uphold male dominance, and enforce moral values, especially with regards to morality and chastity of women. Hell in the afterworld is vividly described to horrify women into submitting to the unjust social relationship between the two sexes\*.

In the traditional Chinese society, the women are therefore reduced to serving the reproductive need of the family as well as the sexual and social needs of men. They are given no independence in economic, political and social activities. This was the situation in the pre-republic China. It was also the setting in which Chinese started to migrate to colonial Malaysia in large numbers.

### *Chinese Women in Malaysia*

In discussing the political participation of Chinese women in Malaysia, we have to look at the factors affecting their participation in politics. They are: (i) opportunity (ii) ability and (iii) motivation.

In the traditional Chinese society in China, because of the social norms of male domination and female subordination, women were strongly forbidden to come into contact with the outside world. They were therefore given no opportunity for political participation. They had also no ability to participate owing to their low educational attainment. They were certainly not motivated to participate.

But the Malaysian setting today is very different from traditional China. First of all, even in China the traditional values relating to the status of women have changed quite substantially, through the various political movements such as the Taiping Rebellion, Hundred Days Reform, the overthrow of Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic, May Fourth Movement etc. In each of these movements, there was strong participation by women.

Chinese in Malaysia are under a different setting. Chinese women in Malaysia today enjoy equal opportunity in education. The number of Chinese females attaining secondary school education and higher, according to the 1980 census, is 25.6% of the total Chinese female. This is not too far behind the corresponding figure of 32.8% for Chinese males. In 1986, the number of females (all ethnic groups) enrolled in local universities is 19,874, making up 40.8% of the total enrolment<sup>10</sup>. In 1990, the number has increased to 26,198 which is 44.9% of the total enrolment<sup>11</sup>. The ability of Chinese women to participate in politics has thus been greatly increased.

The institutionalised social order which worked to assign specific role and status to women in traditional Chinese society has changed greatly in modern Malaysian Chinese society. Malaysian Chinese women have enjoyed today a greater degree of freedom, and they are not secluded from the outside world any more. Their circle of activity has greatly been expanded.

Confinement of Chinese women to the family has also been substantially reduced. Many Chinese families in Malaysia are nuclear families and extended families. Household chores are therefore lightened, especially with the help of maids. They can, therefore, afford to spare part of their time for activities outside the house. Being allowed a larger circle of activities and having extra time for other activities are positive factors that should contribute to greater participation of Chinese women in politics.

The Chinese women in Malaysia have also enjoyed a much higher household income than their counterparts in the traditional Chinese society. The increased income has contributed partially to their ability to come out of the family occasionally to participate in limited political activities.

The major Chinese-based political parties in Malaysia all have women's sections. Many of the Chinese voluntary social organisations such as clan association and alumni associations have also established women's

sections. There are also several Chinese women's organisations. There has been an increasingly active role played by these women's organisations and sections in motivating Chinese women to take part in activities related to politics either directly or indirectly.

In the Selangor and Federal Territory area, of the member organisations under the Chinese Assembly Hall, there are four women organisations, and 24 women's sections in predominantly men's organisations. The women's section of the Chinese Assembly Hall was set up in 1986. In 1991, the newly formed Federation of Chinese Assembly Halls in Malaysia also set up its women's division. Of the 13 Chinese Assembly Hall (one in each state), 11 have set up women's sections<sup>12</sup>.

The women's sections of political parties, of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, of the Federation of Chinese Assembly Halls in Malaysia, and several women's sections in other organisations have been active in organising activities for Chinese women. Activities such as cooking lessons, flower arrangement lessons, dancing lessons, guo-shu (Chinese kungfu) lessons have attracted many women participants. Activities related to festivals, such as mid-autumn festival, dragon boat festival, lantern festival, are also very popular. These are activities aimed at giving the women opportunities to come out of their homes, thus providing them opportunities to participate in other more politically oriented activities, such as talks, seminars, leadership training, workshops and camps. Topics on current or political issues, or issues relating to the well-being of women are often deliberated in such activities, which are aimed at the more educated group. The media, radio and TV, are also often utilised to publicise these activities. Some of the activities are even broadcast in order to reach a larger group of women's section of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall in establishing a counselling centre, which proves to be very popular.

All these efforts are aimed at motivating the Chinese women to participate in politics. The message put across to them is clear. To achieve real gender equality, they have to come out and actively ask for it through political movements.

### *Attitudes Towards Women's Political Participation*

In the previous section I have demonstrated that Chinese women in modern Malaysia who possess the ability, are provided with the opportunity, and are exposed to a great variety of means to motivate them for political participation. But what is the actual situation of their participation?



In the following discussion I shall define political participation as any action or activity that attempts to influence the policy of the government. This definition includes such means as voting, participation in political parties, pressure groups, voluntary organisations and other non-governmental organisations.

According to the statistics provided by the MCA Headquarters, the percentage of female party members are: 12.6% in 1960, 13.2% in 1970, 26.2% in 1980 and 30.6% in 1990. There is clearly an upward trend in Chinese women's direct participation in politics. But it is far below the ideally equal participation.

I have identified through my earlier participation in the women's section of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall and alumni associations, and through conversations with active female participants in politics, some of the common reasons given by Chinese women for being unable to actively participate in politics:

*My husband does not permit  
My husband's parents do not like it  
I have to take care of the children and the housework  
I am too busy, and have no time  
I have no contact, and don't know where to start  
Politics is a man's business; not for woman  
I mind only my own business; let other people do it  
Politics is dirty  
Politics is too complicated for me  
Politics will get me into trouble  
I am not interested*

From the responses given above, it is quite clear that cultural factor is still at force to oppose women's participation in politics, although it is much weaker now than in the traditional society. The notion of male-exterior, female-interior can still be felt. Women are still generally believed to better stay home and care for the family. This same observation is also apparent in regard to Chinese women's participation in the labour force<sup>13</sup>.

Another cultural norm with respect to women's status in society is the conception of male-domination, female-subordination. It is still believed by many that men are the stronger sex, and the important responsibilities must still be shouldered by men. In social organisations in general, the women's sections are often reduced to only supportive if not decorative roles. Political parties are no exceptions.

The general indifferent and often negative attitudes of many women towards political participation can be attributed to the general 'care for thyself' attitudes of the Chinese. In the case of Chinese women, this works particularly stronger when coupled with the inferior status assigned to the women.

### *Conclusion*

I have shown that in the traditional Chinese society, the social norm attributed by religion and culture has defined the status of women as one that is subordinate, inferior and dependent.

In Malaysia, with the universalisation of education, equal opportunity for education, a more open society, and equal voting right for women, Chinese women have the ability, opportunity and motivation for greater participation in politics. But the cultural factor has still to be surmounted. This is not an easy task, as the change in cultural values is a slow and gradual process. It should perhaps be noted that the influence of religion in today's Malaysian Chinese women is not as strong as in the traditional Chinese society. Here, the Chinese religion does not have the support of the social institutions as in the traditional society in order to be able to play an important role in upholding the moral codes of the society. There is a change in its function. It is reduced to the religious rituals only and its role is that of spiritual sanctuary.

The women's sections in the various categories of social and political organisations have organised a wide variety of activities aimed at motivating Chinese women to come forth and participate more actively in politics. With the increase in the level of education, there is encouraging signs of increasing participation. According to the MCA statistics, in 1990, the percentage of female MCA members aged 40 and below is 51.4% of the total female membership, while the corresponding figure for male members is only 45.2%<sup>14</sup>. This indicates that more younger females are attracted or motivated to participate in politics.

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### *Endnotes*

1. ESCAP 1987: 16-18; ESCAP 1989: 85-90.
2. Sundaram 1984: 36.
3. Information obtained from the MCA Headquarters.
4. Information obtained from Wanita Gerakan KLFT office.

5. Tan 1983: 221.
6. Ibid.
7. Chan 1953: 141.
8. Yang 1961: 278, 285.
9. Li 1988: 288, 324, 335, 358.
10. Figures taken from *Educational Statistics of Malaysia 1986*, published by Educational Planning & Research Division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia.
11. Figures taken from *Educational Statistics of Malaysia 1990*, published by Educational Planning & Research Division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia.
12. The 11 states are Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Terengganu, Kelantan, Sarawak, and Sabah.
13. See for example, Wu 1993.
14. Information obtained from MCA Headquarters.

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## RELIGION AND CULTURE : Prohibitive Factors for Women's Participation in Politics?

*Devaki Krishnan*

### *Introduction*

Women are known as the better half by our men. Unfortunately, this better half is let alone better off. There is a marked difference between the access of male and female members to resources, to decision making powers and to disposal of income for example. Until and unless policy makers take note of this difference, there is little hope of benefits being equitably distributed between the sexes.

The definition of males as heads of households often mean that they are the direct beneficiaries of aids from the government either in the form of subsidies or loans. Where women are the head of households, they are deprived of the above benefits and have to seek help from the Social Welfare Department. This is due to the subordination of women within the family. Women, as citizens, have equal status under the law, equal access to education, and can earn equal pay for equal work; but in reality, there is inequality and discrimination in the treatment of women.

Political awareness of women is related to their position and status in a particular society. Political awareness includes not only their consciousness about the political development in the country but also awareness of their political rights as citizens.

The majority of women in the rural areas do not understand what goes on in their environment because they have no access to information. Even if they are aware of the social, religious, economic and political development in the country, they may have no real impact on the political decision making processes. It can be said that the majority of rural women are not politically active members of political parties. Some of them are active in religious and cultural organisations which are political organisations but they are not active in trade unions, social or religious groups championing social, political or economic issues. They are the silent majority.

We are here to discuss the role of women in politics. We should examine women's political role especially when we consider the unique socio-

economic problems encountered by women today. The ultimate aim is to produce more politically matured women in the country.

More than 55% of the total population in our country are women. More than 55% of these women used to live in estates but the figure has now come down to 40% as women migrate into cities for better prospects.

This multi-racial country is moving towards national integration. This means every woman must be able to adjust and assimilate into a Malaysian society without losing her cultural, religious and traditional values. In this respect, religion plays an extremely important function of providing a value system for an individual. Religion is more than a belief system to bring a sense of meaning to the everyday actions of a person. Through its many rituals, religious attempts to imbibe values and traditional norms.

Traditionally, roles in an Asian family are clearly defined. The male provides the basic necessities while the female takes care of the whole family. The woman is secondary to the man in the family. Her social status and success are closely associated with that of her family, and she shares the failures and successes of her family members.

### *Why Lack of Women in Politics*

There are many reasons as to why Malaysian women are politically inactive. One of the most important reason is the cultural definition of their role as women. The culture upholds the feminine qualities in women such as shyness, timidity, respect for others, obedience in the family, whereas the male is regarded as the more superior. The female ideals in Asian families are for women to produce children, take care of household chores, provide love and affection for the members of the family.

In the Asian culture and religious scriptures, motherhood is respected and praised. Although many women are working outside their homes, their household chores have not lessened. They hold jobs and successfully keep a home and look after the family. They have little time left for other social activities, which are considered to be reserved for males.

In addition to the above social pressures for women to play a submissive role to men, the availability of opportunities provided for women to be active politically is very limited. This is seen clearly when we examine the data on women's participation in politics. In 1980, the percentage of female population was about 50%. The political

representation of women was very low. In Parliament, out of a total of 154 members, only eight (8) or about five (5) percent were women.

They are also under-represented in other areas of employment. If the political participation of women at the national level is so low, how can the Malaysian woman hope to have better representation? The lack of opportunities, combined with the social and cultural pressures of their community, explains women's very low level participation in political affairs.

### *Marriage*

Marriage can also pose a problem for many women who want to be actively involved in public life especially in politics. Many parents prefer to see their daughters happily married and therefore may not want their daughters to be involved in political and social organisations. I still come across many men still preferring traditional women to modern women. Hence to satisfy the marriage market, women tend to withdraw from the public life so as to be seen only but not heard. Many women refuse to be members of any political party. In the case of the Indian community, the system of dowry which is linked strongly with the complex system of marriage may also influence the women's level of involvement in public life.

So it is culture, tradition and religion that influence value expectations and behaviour, and which in turn prevents women from being politically active. Some of these values are changing slowly and steadily as a result of modernisation and urban migration. There are women who have ventured into political life guided by their own convictions. Then there are also single women who are leading full and respectable lives. Marriage and raising a family are not necessarily the most important issues to certain individuals.

### *Religion*

Women are expected to maintain the continuity of traditions and religious festivals in the family to ensure the spiritual growth of the family members' inner being. Ignorance of religious foundations, which are laid down in early childhood, is one of the factors that has led to women's misconception of their role in modern society. Unless changes in attitudes are made in the right direction, Malaysian women may not be able to adjust to the rapid changes in society.

## *Education*

Society and cultural practices have also deprived women of their basic education in some Asian countries. Some parents do not encourage their daughters to continue their education beyond the primary level, lest they venture beyond the female traditional function.

The level of educational attainment is an important indicator of the social status of women because most channels for self advancement are opened through education. Increased educational opportunities have definitely benefited women. Therefore, education should be viewed as a means of enlarging people's choices in life besides contributing to national development.

## *Culture*

There are countries where women have to fight for their rights. Some of the equal rights movements have succeeded in making the men accept women's emancipation while others continue to be completely subjected by the men who are regarded as more superior in their lives. This remains a great handicap and a lingering mental conflict in some women. Along with that is the woman's own age-long belief in living the concept of the silently suffering 'Sita', which remains the ideal of even the most liberated woman.

There is a lapse between the legislation of women's rights and the social sanctions required to make the legislation a reality. This is certainly true in terms of the status of women.

## *Women in Politics*

The position of women and their political future is bleak. Malaysia currently has two full Ministers, two Deputy Ministers, one Parliamentary Secretary - a total of eleven (11) Parliamentarians, ten (10) Senators and seventeen (17) women Assembly members. The imbalance must be corrected by the various women's wings of political parties, trade unions and women's organisations, to press for greater representation for women in various Local Councils, State Legislatures, Senate, Parliament and various Government and non-Government Boards.

Government must be pressured to obtain successful and meaningful results. Unless and until women organisations get together, unite and demand for women's political rights, women are not marching in the right step towards the year 2000.

Since the population of women in this country is more than the men, therefore an increase of registered women voters will help to drive home the message that more women are needed in all state and national seats in Government. When women and men are equal in work, salary, position and rank, there is no reason to slow the rise of women in politics. Women must be directed and motivated towards politics.

### *Women's Organisations*

Women's organisations should not think that they are there only to train women to be good tailors, cooks, florists, child minders, etc. The time has come for women to take bigger steps to participate and rise up in politics to fight for women's rights. In some European and Asian countries, men have recognised the capabilities and contributions of women, and they have elected women as capable Prime Ministers.

### *Conclusion*

As we approach the year 2000, the solution to the existing setback does not lie either in fighting for equal position or denying women of equal rights. Neither does it lie in the women's retreat to the home nor the forging away from the home. The issue needs to be addressed as a human issue and not a gender issue.

In politics there is no gender difference. The women who have been voted as Prime Ministers in certain countries have won because of their merit and not because they are women. They are also voted by both the men and women of their countries. However, a woman aspiring to be a political leader must be capable, dynamic and better than her political opponent(s).

Changes are required in the social conception and definition of the roles of women. These changes can help bring forth a positive transformation of society where women have better self-respect and self-confidence, and where every member of society—whether female or male—can develop her/his social and intellectual potential to the full for the ultimate betterment of society and the nation.

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*Mrs Devaki Krishnan is the Deputy National Women Leader in Wanita MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). She was the first woman to contest a general election in 1952 and 1959 for Kuala Lumpur municipality and the Selangor State Assembly.*



# ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROMOTING POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

*Abdul Rahman Sulaiman*

## *Introduction:*

The word media used in this topic is taken to mean the communication media which by definition are channels or tools by which messages are transmitted from the sender to the receiver. There are several known means of communication used by modern society, namely, newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books, pamphlets, motion pictures and the like, or any of the electronic medium such as radio, television and computers.

There are other means of communication such as verbal conversation between individuals either face-to-face or using telephones. The last two forms of communication are examples of interpersonal channels which presumably are not the concern of this seminar.

The focus of this paper is therefore on the mass media which are further categorised into three main groups:

- i) The Print Media (excluding books, magazines and periodicals)
- ii) The Electronic Media
- iii) Motion Pictures

This paper will attempt to examine the role of the mass media in helping to promote political consciousness and participation of women in Malaysia.

## *Media Impact*

It is often assumed that newspapers, radio, television or films are powerful media that can change human behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, values and way of life. As a result, the mass media are widely used for public campaigns by public servants, politicians, corporate leaders and others.

On the negative side, the media are often accused of corrupting the morals of society. Occasionally, the media are even blamed for political

upheavals, social unrests, disasters or even wars. Such are the assumptions the public have on the impact of the media on their daily life.

Early communication researchers in the United States call this model of mass communication flow as Hypodermic Needle Model which postulates that the mass media have direct, immediate and powerful effects on a mass audience.

The model which pictured the mass media as a giant hypodermic needle, aimed at a passive audience has several weaknesses:-

- It fails to recognise the many intervening variables operating between the initial communicator and the ultimate response by the receiver.
- It assumes that the all-powerful media are able to impress ideas on defenceless minds.
- It assumes that the mass audiences are only connected to the mass media but not to each other.

The mass media in this respect are conceived as having an all-powerful influence on human behaviour. The omnipotent media are pictured as sending forth messages to atomised masses waiting to receive them, with nothing intervening.

According to Everett M. Rogers and Floyd Shoemaker in their book, "Communication of Innovations - A Cross-Cultural Approach" (1971), evidence of the great manipulative power of the mass media came from such historical events such as:-

- The role of the US newspapers in arousing positive public opinion towards the Spanish-American War,
- The apparent power of Goebbel's propaganda machine in World War II, and
- Fear of Madison Avenue's influence on consumer and voting behaviour.

Eventually, the research methods that came to be utilised in communication inquiry cast considerable doubt on the hypodermic needle model simply because it was based primarily on intuitive theorising about historical events and was too simple, too mechanistic, too gross to account accurately for mass media effects.

The decisive discarding of the hypodermic needle model resulted from a classic study of the 1940 Presidential election. This inquiry was designed with the hypodermic needle model in mind, and was aimed at analysing

the role of the mass media in clinching political decisions. The evidence indicated that almost no voting choices were directly influenced by the mass media.

Lazarsfeld & Menzel who conducted the study reported that :

*"the ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population. The first step, from sources to opinion leaders, is mainly the transfer of information, whereas the second step, from opinion leaders to their followers, involves also the spread of influence."*

This later model, known as the Two-Step Flow Model, provides a useable conceptual framework for examining mass communication phenomena. It helps focus attention upon the role of the mass media and interpersonal interfaces. Instead of assuming, as did the hypodermic needle model, that the masses are a large body of disconnected individuals hooked up to the media but not to each other, the two-step flow model views the masses as interacting individuals.

### *Limitation*

It is clear from the above discussion that there is a limit to the power of the media. In the context of this subject, the media can only help promote political consciousness and participation among Malaysian women to a limited extent. That limitation is further compounded by the in-built constraints inherent among individuals or group of individuals which ultimately form the audience.

It is common knowledge that a person's capacity to perceive media messages and the manner by which these messages are interpreted will largely depend on that particular person's level of education, political beliefs, value system, skills, and attitude such as his biasness, predisposition or prejudices. A person who hates politics, for example, will more often than not avoid political messages however convincing they may be. Likewise, a newspaper reader whose only interest is on women's affairs or sports are likely to skip political stories or articles in the daily papers.

### *Present Problem*

It is nevertheless not the intention of this paper to suggest that the media

should be left alone in efforts to make more Malaysian women interested in politics, and in the process participate more effectively in political activities. Indeed, the media have a role in this respect. These roles are still important ones, however remote they can be.

To see where these roles are significant, one could perhaps examine the various stages of an individual's mental process before he or she decides to adopt or reject any change.

Many researchers have conceptualised a cumulative series of five stages in the process: (1) awareness (first knowledge of the new idea), (2) interest (gaining further knowledge about the idea), (3) evaluation (gaining a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the idea), (4) small-scale trial, and (5) adoption or rejection.

Functionally, however, the process can be divided into four main functions, namely:-

- i) The knowledge function, which occurs when the individual is exposed to the existence of the new idea and gains some understanding of how it functions.
- ii) The persuasion function, which occurs when the individual forms a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the idea.
- iii) The decision function, which occurs when the individual engages in activities that gives him/her the choice of adoption or rejection of the idea(s).
- iv) The confirmation function, which occurs when the individual seeks reinforcement for the decision he has made, but he may reverse his previous decision if exposed to conflicting messages about the idea.

It is obvious therefore that the media is effective in terms of fulfilling the first two functions in the decision-making process. These roles should then be complemented by the other communication media including the interpersonal channel to reinforce the message.

This brings to more pertinent questions: Is there a real need to create more awareness among Malaysian women on politics? Is it wrong to leave politics to men alone? Is it good socially for more Malaysian women to get involved in political affairs of the nation? The answers to these questions will have to be provided by the women themselves.

A quick look at current statistics on women's participation in politics tends to suggest that there are still room for improvement. As an example,

out of the current 180 members of the Dewan Rakyat, only nine are women. At the state assembly level, only 15 out of 461 members of the various State Legislative Assemblies are women.

The figure represents a gross misrepresentation considering the fact that more than 9 million out of the slightly over 18 million Malaysian population are women.

It is, however, sad to note that although women politicians are few in number, they do not seem to be taken seriously by society. To a certain extent, the media are also equally guilty in this respect. A clear example of this is the relatively less exposure or publicity given by the local media to women politicians. Even at the annual conventions of the various political parties, only junior or less experienced journalists are deployed to cover the proceedings of the *Wanita* wings. Yet, women or their contributions are badly sought after during election campaigns or any other national campaigns over particular issues.

### *Conclusion:*

To create more political awareness and participation among Malaysian women, it is hereby suggested that:-

- Newspapers, magazines and other forms of print media carry more items, articles or features on the success of women politicians in the hope that this will motivate other women to follow in their footsteps.
- They should also encourage more women journalists to cover political and more serious beats rather than concentrating merely on women affairs or fashion.
- Radio and TV stations should use more women to anchor more serious programmes such as political talk shows, forums and the like.
- Movie-makers should use more women to depict serious characters rather than portraying them as stereotyped secretaries, passive wives or mistresses.

# ETHNICITY, POLITICAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION

*Kamilia Ibrahim*

## *Introduction*

Malaysian politics is not as diverse as its multi-racial population. Despite a population of about 10 different ethnic groups, cultures, languages, affiliations and religions, political groups still have very common objectives. Women's politics do not differ much from the men's except that the men are in control of the political structure and hierarchy in the respective political parties and the bureaucracy. Malaysian women do not engage themselves in women's liberation politics nor politics of the gender. What seems to be the struggle is for the women—forming half of the population of the country and half of the voting electorate—to aggregate themselves with “women vote” to enable more balanced representation of women elected to public office and holding key bureaucratic positions.

It would be interesting to note that gender politics has no role in the country because there are hardly any issues that divide men and women. Both sexes are as intensely concerned about issues relating to nation building and unity, education, health care, human rights violation, public office corruption, poverty, drug abuse, economic development and crime and lawlessness.

Therefore, the diversity of political parties based on ethnic grouping, does not divert the common goals to be achieved. Howsoever, it is not too far-fetched to observe that the struggles of each political party are underlined by the ethnicity factor. Each constitution of the political party is undeniably laced by ethnicity drive or mission.

The crucial questions to be posed are to what extent is ethnicity a driving force or a catalyst towards achieving peace, unity and prosperity in the country. Is ethnicity an overwhelming factor? How does it affect political awareness and participation?

Before we delve into the subject matter proper, let us try to understand the concept of “politics”. One's perception or one ethnic group's perception of politics need to be synchronised in order to achieve peace, unity and prosperity in diversity.

"Politics" has been made a study since 500 B.C. and many interpretations were devised, and philosophers and political scientists born. Socrates, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and others expounded many theories. Among the outstanding books, one was written by John Locke entitled "Two Treatises of Government" (1690) which greatly influenced the democratic system of government in the United States and the world over. However, it is interesting to note a Muslim scholar, Al-Ghazali's view in his book entitled "Fatihatul-'Ulum'" which gave a very broad insight into the concept of "clean" politics.

To quote Al-Ghazali, (1050-1111):

"Politics is for community unity and co-operative living. It works towards a common good and interest under guided restraints, upholding morality and giving guidance for human happiness and well-being. Political scientists and scholars are to merge to give complete guidance for efficient implementation of work, responsibility and policies, to maintain social stability and strength".

In short - politics is actually the management of people towards common good which would mean unity in diversity, equality in economy, stability in politics and justice in social amenities. Therefore, it is imperative upon the political leaders to guide and direct the people to work together towards the good of the society and to ensure that the stability of the community on the whole is safeguarded.

The underlining factor is unity vide co-operation vide strong leadership and control. Politics should not be seen as a game of power but as serious commitment of a very strong sense of responsibility and duty. Strong, charismatic, good and religiously, if not morally, bound leaders are important to ensure justice and peace in a nation. To determine such leadership in a country which practices principles of democracy, the members are actually the determining factor vide being the voters to determine the party leadership and the party policies.

With this perception of politics in mind it is therefore imperative upon us to next define ethnicity in the context of political awareness and participation. Evidently, political awareness is essential towards effective participation.

How do we then define ethnicity in our country? In the spirit of *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) it means working together, winning the general election with compromises on allocation of seats in Parliament and States

and with agreed quota of Ministerial and Deputy Ministerial posts in the Federal Cabinet, with the ultimate objective of maintaining peace and unity in the country. This is an apparently simple formula for unity and prosperity.

To my mind ethnicity should have a very simple and straight forward meaning whether to politicians or just ordinary citizens of the country. It should not be construed to mean anything negative that could lead to apprehension, fear, jealousy or any other negative feelings or emotions that could lead to misunderstandings or racial disharmony.

Unfortunately, ethnicity has caused disunity and bloodshed—obvious examples are events in Bosnia and the Middle-East. Ethnic cleansing of the Bosnians by the Serbs and the continuous destruction by the Zionists of the Palestinians, the racial riots in Los Angeles, USA (29 April - 1 May 1992), the Solingen Tragedy, Germany (May 1993), and the Babri Mosque massacre in India (1992). But in this age of man's civilisation, why do we allow the recurrence of such incidents? What is the order of the day? Is it a prelude of the NEW WORLD ORDER versus HUMANITY?

History has revealed that the quest for ethnic freedom has been the main push factor for political activities and armed conflicts—as seen in southern Europe and the Balkan States—during the struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire. Ethnicity has incited strong sentiments since time immemorial, and currently with the disintegration of strong ideology and weakening of central governments, ethnicity has become an important factor in determining identity. This in turn has affected the relationship between nations, if not between citizens of the nations themselves.

Do we perceive ethnicity as a very important element in Malaysian politics? Do we have an identity crisis in our country? Do we see ourselves as effective, serious political contributors towards nation building? How do we see our role in politics?

In the Malaysian context, political awareness means that women or men of the country should be aware of the fact that there is a need for unity and understanding among all ethnic groups in the country; that there is a need for a nation to live in peace, working towards progress and development. There is a need for women to strive to participate in the election of leaders in the ruling party elections as well as federal elections and other objectives incidental thereto.



Women need to serve as watchdogs and implement all the policies of the party, of the government, and nation. That citizens of the country are well protected and their fundamental rights guaranteed, that the government is fair, the judiciary is independent, and the legislature meets the needs of the people.

In conclusion, *Wanita* UMNO has played an effective role in the government by adopting a moderate approach, over the past forty years. It is well represented in the Cabinet with two women Ministers, two Deputy ministers, and three State Exco members, in addition to two backbenchers and six Senators. *Wanita* UMNO members are active political participants at all levels, especially at the grassroot level, where *Wanita* UMNO is a political force to be reckoned with in Malaysia.

## ETHNICITY, POLITICAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION

*Tan Yee Kew*

### *Introduction*

In the deliberation of women's political awareness and participation in Malaysia, it is necessary to take into consideration the ethnic diversities of the society. The unique history and culture of each of these groups determine to a large extent the degree of their political awareness and participation. At this forum, I shall focus my discussion only on the Chinese women.

Although the Chinese women's participation in politics may be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their participation was mainly confined to a small group of activists who primarily saw their political struggle as part of the liberation movement that was taking place in China at that time. It was only during the Post-War period that some began to get involved in local politics. Even then, women in general remained unconcerned in politics.

When the MCA (the Malaysian Chinese Association) was formed in 1949, a special committee for women and youth was created to cater for the needs of the two groups. However, female membership was insignificant during the Party's formative years. Up to 1960 there were only 929 female members and their activities were mainly confined to cultural activities, and social as well as welfare services.

MCA branches and divisions began to set up their women's wings during the sixties. However, it was not until 1975 that the national organisations of Wanita MCA was formally established under the leadership of Datin Rosemary Chong.

Membership of Wanita MCA has since then grown steadily, from 5,665 in 1970 to 70,956 in 1980 and 158,682 in 1990. Today, its membership stands at 182,774, constituting about 30.9% of the total MCA membership. Considering the relatively short span of time since its formation, the growth of its female membership is not too discouraging. However, comparing it with the membership of Wanita UMNO which is about 800,000, and considering the large number of Chinese women who do not join any

political party, it becomes evident that Chinese women's political participation lags far behind their Malay counterparts.

Admittedly, women who stay away from any political party may not be women of no political awareness. Yet, from my experience and observations, political seminars and activities generally receive very poor response from Chinese women, particularly the professionals. In 1987, an occupational analysis of the *Wanita* MCA members showed that 43.4% of them were housewives. Among its working members, the majority were general workers, rubber tappers, teachers, hawkers and small business women. Professionals constituted less than 0.5% of the total membership.

Many reasons have been forwarded to explain the obvious lack of enthusiasm in politics among professional women. Among them are the traditional Chinese culture which perceives politics as men's affairs, the lack of incentives and opportunities for higher political posts, the heavy workload and busy schedules of the professionals, and their reluctance to work with grassroot members. These reasons are relevant not only to professional women but also to women in general.

It is interesting to observe that Chinese women in rural areas and the new villages are more ready to join political parties than their city counterparts. It is not unusual that the whole village would turn out for a political party unity dinner which is often regarded as an important social event in the village. For the rural women, *Wanita* MCA offers them the opportunity to participate in social activities and provides them the rare exposure to the outside world. One may argue that women who join a political party for social reasons will have little political awareness and that their participation can hardly be considered as political. Yet, it needs to be pointed out that the cultivation of political awareness among rural women must necessarily begin by creating among them an awareness of their social environment. The politically motivated social activities thus form an integral part of the politicisation process.

It is undoubtedly true that the Chinese women in general have not attained the level of political awareness and participation that we would like to see. Yet, given the odds, some advances have been made during the past years. For instance, women political workers have gained more important roles in the mainstream of politics. There are three Chinese MPs, two Senators and three State Assembly women (including all political parties). The number though small is nevertheless a positive indication of the progress made.

During the thirty-odd years after Independence, Malaysian politics has become almost institutionalised along ethnic lines. Notwithstanding this, women from different ethnic groups have been able to find common grounds in dealing with women issues. For instance, the repeal and amendment of laws that were unfavourable to women rape victims were the results of joint efforts by women political workers from different ethnic based political parties. Similarly, women political workers, disregarding their ethnicity are united in championing for the Domestic Violence Act and the proposed amendments of the Women and Girls Protection Act.

## ETHNICITY, POLITICAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION

Toh Kin Woon  
Surin Leong

### *Introduction*

The primary objective of this paper is to discuss the extent of women's participation in politics in Malaysia, its problems and prospects. Some mention will also be made of ethnic consciousness and political awareness among Malaysian women. By women's participation in politics is meant the incidence of Malaysian women in the political decision-making process as measured by the number of women in the national legislatures, the Cabinet and the senior administrative positions at both the Federal and State Governments, and the ratio of women to men in these key branches of the government. It is obvious that these by themselves are insufficient as measures of women's political participation and that these need to be complemented by others such as their participation in the leadership of political parties, trade unions and other non-governmental organisations. By studying the incidence of women in the national legislatures, the cabinet and the senior administrative posts, we are but only looking at one aspect of women's political participation in Malaysia. Our paper is thus not comprehensive in its coverage of the subject but we would offer the need for prompt publication in extenuation.

### *Arguments for Greater Women's Participation in Politics*

That Malaysian women's participation in political decision-making at the national level is still relatively low, compared to its percentage composition of the national population, is readily apparent. While there has been some progress over the years, much needs to be done to boost women's numbers in key branches of the government viz the legislatures, the executive and judiciary. Although there are no legal prohibitions on women's participation in Malaysia, *de facto* participation is much less than desired. Nowhere in the situation of women is the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality so wide. A question often asked, however, is: Why is there a necessity to be so gender-specific in encouraging greater political participation? Several reasons may be put forward in reply.

- (a) Women make up at least half of the Malaysian population. Their representation in key political decision-making bodies should therefore reflect this, if there is to be true democracy and egalitarianism.
- (b) Women's under-representation can be dangerous for the legitimacy of the democratic system since issues brought up for discussions and the nature of their subsequent legislations are determined without adequate participation by women. A good case in point was the recent passage of the Domestic Violence Bill through both Houses of Parliament. While all female and many male Members of Parliament (MPs) supported the Bill, there were some male MPs who expressed reservations. Greater female representation would have meant not just a smoother passage but a more comprehensive bill aimed at checking physical abuses towards women.
- (c) The third argument is of differences in interest. Political participation involves articulating, providing and defending interests, an argument alluded to above. Women are conditioned to have different social roles, functions and values. It is reasonable to believe that women are more aware of their own needs and therefore better able to press for them.
- (d) The fourth argument is that of changing the focus of politics. If women's participation in politics can be increased, there will be an enlargement in the scope of the political agenda. Issues such as child care, sexuality, family planning and wife battery, issues once confined to the private sphere but are now seen as political, is a good case in point.
- (e) The final argument concerns the efficient use of human resources. No country can afford not to utilise all its human resources. Given that women constitute half of Malaysia's pool of potential talent and ability, excluding them from positions of power and from elected bodies would thus impoverish our society and inhibit the just development of our country. (*Women in Politics and Decision-Making in the Late Twentieth Century* - A United Nations Study, 1992).

### *Incidence of Women's Participation*

The incidence of women's participation in the political decision-making and administrative bodies of Malaysia is as shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the Table, women are still relatively under-represented in key legislative and executive bodies, viz the Cabinet, civil service and statutory

authorities. Women currently make up only 5.6 percent of the Malaysian MPs, compared to the 1987 world average of 9.7 percent. It is also less than the 1987 average percentages of women in lower houses in Eastern Europe (26.6%), Western industrialised countries (13.2%), Latin America and the Caribbean (7.5%), Asia and the Pacific (7.0%) and Africa (7.2%).

**Table 1**  
**Women's Representation in the Malaysian Cabinet Dewan Rakyat, Dewan Negara, Federal and State Administration as at June 1993**

Name of Body	Total Number	Number of Women	Percentage	Ratio of Men:Women
Cabinet: Minister	26	2	7.7	12 : 1
/Deputy Minister	31	3	9.7	9.3 : 1
Menteri Besar and Chief Minister	13	0	0	13 : 1
Dewan Rakyat (Lower House of Representatives)	180	10	5.6	17 : 1
Dewan Negara (Senate)	58	13	22.4	3.5 : 1
Secretaries-General of Ministries	25	1	4.0	24 : 1
Heads of Federal Department	65	3	4.6	21 : 1
Heads of State Departments	39	0	0	39 : 1

As on 9 May 1994

Source: Compiled by authors

The number of women holding Ministerial and Deputy Ministerial positions, as a percentage of the total is, however, higher at 7.7 percent and 9.7 percent respectively. None of the executive Heads of State is a woman. Only 1 out of 25 Secretaries-General of Ministries and 3 out of 65 Heads of Federal Departments are women, with none holding the post of State Secretary, State Legal Adviser and State Financial Officer. The only bright spot is in the Dewan Negara, Malaysia's Upper House, all of whose members are either indirectly elected by the various State Legislative Assemblies or nominated by His Majesty the King. Currently, 22.4 percent

of the Malaysian Senators are women, a figure comparable to that of Austria (also 22.4%) and the Netherlands (26.0%) in 1989. Women's representation in Malaysia's Upper House surpasses that of most other countries on which the Inter-Parliamentary Union has data on political representation.

### *Why So Few*

Although under-representation of women in positions of political power and senior administrative posts is a worldwide phenomenon, it appears to be more marked in Malaysia. What accounts for this under-representation?

- (i) One plausible explanation may be found in the relatively lower level of educational attainment and hence the relatively lower level of political awareness of women in comparison to men. Women's political participation may have been hindered by their relatively lower social and economic status in society. This gives rise to a vicious circle. The relatively lower social and economic status of women is seen as an obstacle to greater women's participation in top-level political decision-making yet, unless there is greater involvement, women's level of economic, social and educational attainments is unlikely to be enhanced. This is because increased resources for such advancement often have to come from the public sector. But such increased resource commitments are unlikely to take place unless there is increased public sector sensitivity to the urgency of uplifting the overall status of women. Such enhanced sensitivity in turn requires a substantially larger presence of women ministers, legislators and administrators, which currently is not the case.
- (ii) Yet another obstacle to greater political involvement of women is the cultural-religious factor. Stereotype perceptions of women such as that women are too emotional and are therefore not capable of evaluating political matters rationally and that they would lose their femininity by their involvement in politics are still widespread in men and even women. There is also the added religious view which claims that the domestic commitments of women are sufficiently heavy and therefore very demanding of their time such that there is realistically little of this resource left for the assumption of political leadership. Unless removed, these widespread values can pose as very serious impediments to women's participation in top-level political decision-making.



## *Political Awareness*

As mentioned earlier, the incidence of women in key legislative and executive positions is not a complete measure of political participation of women, much less their political awareness and consciousness. For the latter, we need data on the proportion of total membership in political parties and unions that is made up of women. Even these are not sufficient as indices of political consciousness of women. For women, as much as men, are involved in community actions groups, in issue or interest groups, such as environmental or peace groups and women's organisations or in individual political activities. Examples of the latter are canvassing, contacting civil servants or politicians, making calls to the media, joining in demonstrations or signing petitions.

In Malaysia, there is evidence to suggest that women in all political parties have been active in political canvassing. Indeed, one of the major factors accounting for the continuous electoral success of UMNO, the leading party in Malaysia's ruling coalition, has been the effectiveness of its women's wing in mobilising women voters to come out in full force to vote for the party. Women have also shown leadership during times of crises, such as the famous 'Minah Karen' incident when thousands of female electronic workers in Penang demonstrated against retrenchment and for the right to work in the industrial crisis of the mid-eighties. But despite evidences to show that women do participate in what might be termed 'protest' or 'ad hoc' activities, they are unlikely to be more active in politics and therefore to have on average a higher level of political awareness than men. Relatively lesser access to lower access to the media, both print and electronic, which are key purveyors of news on political events and development both in the world and in our country.

Besides, stereotype perceptions, values and attitudes, which are still widely prevalent, have helped from frameworks within which women's political participation is confined. In many political parties, women's activities are confined to cooking for seminar participants or cultural pursuits such as running sewing, kindergarten and flower arrangement classes. These are hardly activities that have much political content. Yet they are often organised as a result of gender stereotyping.

## *Ethnic Consciousness*

Malaysia, as is commonly known, is a multi-ethnic country. Like most other multi-racial settings, ethnic consciousness is still widespread and

prevalent among each and every race in Malaysia. Such ethnic consciousness is not-gender specific, however. By this is meant that women are as much conscious of their ethnic background as are men. This is to be expected, for race is a social category, with its common language, customs, culture and may be even religion, to which both men and women readily identify. It is, however, not the only social category. There are others such as gender and class which compete for the loyalties of human beings. In a society where ethnic issues claim greater attention, gender and class-related issues tend, however, to be sidelined, especially within the political arena. A significant part of political consciousness is thus preoccupied with ethnic based issues. This can give rise to ethnic tensions and rivalries. But these have been very much contained to mild and tolerable levels, so that Malaysia can be said to enjoy a relatively stable and harmonious political environment. The success of Malaysia in terms of management to its ethnic relations lies in the economic success of the country and the government's adoption of a series of measures aimed at controlling the debate on ethnic related issues. To us, however, a more effective and longer term measure is to promote greater Malaysian consciousness through non-racial political movements such as Parti Gerakan.

### *Parti Gerakan's Way - The Malaysian Line*

In Peninsular Malaysia, Parti Gerakan is the only major party within the ruling Barisan Nasional that is non-ethnic and that pursues what may be called, for want of a better term, the Malaysian line. What is this line and why do we choose to pursue it? The Malaysian line dictates that we should adopt a non-racial approach towards the resolution of political, social and economic problems faced by the country. This implies that problems confronted by the Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Ibans and Orang Asli are all national problems which must claim our attention and hence must be tackled and overcome. Guided by this approach, Parti Gerakan advocated that needs be the basis of state support. If implemented, whosoever is poor, underprivileged and economically weak, irrespective of ethnic background, shall have claim to state resources in the form of scholarships, subsidies and licences for the upliftment of his or her economic well-being. This way, we stress socio-economic needs of all ethnic groups and downplay ethnicity, thereby weakening ethnic consciousness while realising the slogan "that all have their place under the Malaysian sun". It is only when the latter is achieved can Malaysian consciousness be nurtured and developed. Merit, irrespective of race, as the basis of promotion is also what Parti Gerakan has long advocated as part of its ideological struggle. Emphasis on merit promotes excellence. Such an

approach can successfully mobilise the entire nation's pool of talent and skills, to the benefit of the country as a whole.

By taking the non-racial approach, the scope and agenda of Parti Gerakan's struggle tend to be more broad-based. For a start, we take up issues that affect all. We are concerned with Malay poverty as we are with the problem of dilapidated housing of the Indian estate workers or the lack of facilities in Chinese primary schools in New Villages. We are not and should not be confined to taking up issues of any one particular community only for we are all Malaysians. In additions, we are concerned with common issues and problems like environmental degradation, women's rights, human rights and greater democracy.

In short, the major ideological orientation of Parti Gerakan is to launch a larger scale political movement aimed at promoting Malaysian consciousness and nationalism. At the same time as we eschew racism, such consciousness is to emphasise the common aspirations, values and struggles of all Malaysians, their ethnic, religious and cultural diversity notwithstanding.

We in Parti Gerakan choose the non-ethnic line of struggle for 3 major reasons:

- (i) First, such a line of struggle involves all Malaysians, be they Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazans or Dayaks. Our political movement for change is thus a national movement that involves all and is not just confined to any one particular ethnic group. We trust that this will mobilise the productive energies and efforts of our entire nation rather than a part or it. This, we believe, should yield greater dividends for the country as a whole.
- (ii) When governance is based on the non-ethnic approach, it has the advantage of overcoming feelings of alienation so often experienced by one or two ethnic groups in a multi-racial society ruled by a ruling coalition that comprises several ethnic-based parties. The latter happens when one party that represents one community is the more dominant and is therefore seen to be more pre-disposed to that community.
- (iii) The non-racial approach, by virtue of it being based on criteria other than race, does not give rise to feelings of exclusion. A greater sense of belonging and sharing is thus built-up. This should augur well for the creation of a united Malaysia comprising Malaysian citizens who

are more conscious of themselves as Malaysians rather than their respective individual ethnic background. Our stress on commonalities aids this process further.

Given our stand, an interesting question is the extent of support for our cause from among women in Malaysia. This is what we turn to next.

### *Wanita Gerakan (Women's Wing of Parti Gerakan)*

Wanita Gerakan was formed only in November 1982, about 14 years after the formation of the main body. Currently, Parti Gerakan has about 13,000 women members, which make up about 8.5 percent of the total membership. There are 4 women members out of a total of 38 in the party's Central Committee. The party does not have a single female MP. It has only 1 State Legislative Councillor, who is also a State Executive Councillor in Penang. At the local government level, 5 out of 115 Municipal and District Councillors or about 4.4 percent are females. Female participation in Parti Gerakan is thus very modest. So is female representation in the party's decision-making bodies and participation in the legislative and the executive branches of the government. The latter is reflection of Party Gerakan's overall representation, which is small, in comparison to that of UMNO, MCA and MIC in the ruling coalition.

### *Conclusion*

Our analysis suggests that female participation in key political and administrative positions in our country is much less than the female proportion of the total population. Although increasing such representation to a level that is reflective of its proportion of total population is an impractical ideal, and nobody is suggesting this, not even the women themselves, still we agree that women's representation needs to be considerably enhanced. The fundamental question is how? An examination of the characteristics of those countries where women have an above-average level of participation suggests several groups of possible factors that might be related to better access. These include the country's level of economic development, since many of the countries with above average levels of women in decision-making are wealthier. Female educational levels and labour force participation rates are also important. These factors imply that as average household incomes, female educational levels and female labour force participation rates all increase, women's political participation should increase as well. A key step in enhancing women's

political participation should thus be the general socio-economic enhancement of women. A worry, though, are the inhibitions posed by cultural and religious barriers. Even as average incomes increase, religious barriers may also gather strength so that rising average affluence may be accompanied by continuous under-representation of women in political decision-making. We are thus of the view that while socio-economic advancement may be important, it is not sufficient to guarantee women's enhanced involvement in political participation, unless cultural-religious obstacles that stand in the way are removed as well.

To boost women's political decision-making power, governments, non-governmental organisations, political parties, trade unions, the private sector, women's groups and individuals should:

- introduce special measures to increase the proportion of women involved in political decision-making;
- secure women's right to stand for elections and hold public or political office;
- campaign to promote women's issues on political platforms;
- generate support networks so that more women can campaign for public office at grassroots, states and national levels; and
- to promote qualified women to positions of power at every level within political, legislative and judicial bodies (*Women-Challenges to the Year 2000*, United Nations, New York, 1991).

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*Dr Toh Kin Woon is an Economic Consultant and a Senator representing Penang in Senate in the Parliament of Malaysia. He obtained his M.A. in Development Economics at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Economics from the University of Malaya.*

*Ms Surin Leong Soo Yong is the Training Manager of the Resort and Hotel Group in Malaysia. She joined Parti Gerakan in 1982 and since then has held posts as Secretary-General, Wanita Gerakan; Chairman, Kepong Wanita Gerakan Division; and Committee Member, KLFT State Liaison.*

## ETHNICITY, POLITICAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION

*Murugesu Pathmanathan  
Jaya Partiban*

**E**thnicity is the outstanding characteristic in the structure and organisation of political parties in Malaysia. And it is ethnicity, that is the most pervasive element in the political process, far more pervasive and predominant than the factor of even ideology. The element of ethnicity colours and shapes political activity, both formal and informal, to such an extent that it is taken to be a very natural phenomenon. Any discussion of political awareness and participation, will, both invariably and inevitably, touch on the issue of ethnicity.

The evolution of political awareness and participation in Malaysia as in other countries, has been very much a product of political, economic and social developments. For Malaysia, the defining moments and experiences in terms of political awareness and participation in its post Second World War history, have been the colonial experience, the achievement of independence, the formation of Malaysia, the civil disturbances of 13 May 1969, the New Economic Policy and the impact of modernisation and industrialisation. This evolution and participation in terms of the political process has been moulded and guided by the political ideology of communism and the primordial force of communalism.

In order to understand the role and participation of women in the political arena, it will be essential to grasp the various factors that have shaped the nature and configuration of this participation. Whilst it is not possible or feasible to establish this in any detail within the constraints of this contribution, this factor must be constantly kept in mind in discussing this.

In essential terms, the modern political process is very much an inheritance of Malaysia's colonial experience. All the major institutions of modern government in the areas of legislation, judicial power and executive authority have been borrowed from the Westminster model, with modifications that have incorporated to some extent, the modern political history of Malaysia and the Malay historical and social heritage. The structure and organisation of Parliament, the pattern of the judicial hierarchy and the structure of executive authority were at the onset of the transfer of power, closely modeled on British government. This was the

order that prevailed in many former colonial territories of the British Empire when they achieved independence. In a similar manner, political organisation and political activity was mainly channelled through political parties and groups that often sought role-models within the British political experience. However, this is not to deny the impact of non-British political experiences on the evolution of Malaysian political parties, groups and organisations. Whilst this is not an appropriate point for a detailed discussion of this, it should be borne in mind that organisations like the Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan Indian Congress sought inspiration from non-British sources.

In the decades after independence, Malaysia's alignment broadly was with the western group of democratic nations. This alignment was intensified by the geo-politics of the Cold War and also deepened, to some extent, by the experience of Konfrontasi. Although, Malaysia adopted a stance of non-alignment in 1970, the internal dynamics of political activity continued to be very much influenced by the western democratic ethos. The dissolution of the Cold War struggle and the break-up of the Soviet Union have served to further emphasise and highlight democracy as a major factor in the political evolution of the countries of the developing world including Malaysia. As a matter of fact, the process of democratisation is an important world-wide political trend which is bound to have very important and serious consequences on the political, economic and social profile of the countries of the developing world. Malaysia is no exception to this.

Any discussion of political awareness and participation has to focus substantially on political parties and associated structures. Consequently, an understanding of political parties and structures is crucial to analysing the particular reasons for the absence or enhancement of political awareness among the general population and within particular segments or ethnic groups of the general population. Yet, it should be borne in mind that political awareness or the absence of it, is not purely the result of political parties or particular programmes of such political parties. A variety of organisations and social groups affect political awareness and participation. These include among others, the mass media, both print and electronic, popular and academic publications, social organisations, government agencies such as the Ministry of Information, and a whole spectrum of non-governmental organisations.

At this point it might be worthwhile to focus slightly on the role of political parties. Although the struggle for political power in domestic politics, is, as a rule, no longer fought with physical violence and turmoil,

factionalism and rivalry are perpetuated and institutionalised in the activity of political parties. Partisanship and competition are an integral part of the political process because the goals of winning elections are to staff the government, perpetuate an ideology, keep a party in power and to control the formulation and implementation of public policy. Often a political party can be described in terms of the purpose for which it was organised, the character of the membership, its structure or the functions it performs. Edmund Burke, the English thinker and parliamentarian viewed a party as "a group of men who had agreed upon a principle by which the national interest might be served". Other writers have defined a party as an organised group of individuals seeking to obtain governmental power in order to enjoy the benefits flowing from such control. A political party has also been defined as a coalition of group interest representing a segment of society.

Any discussion of the nature of a political party should take account of the distinction between the broad mass of members, whose affiliation is only nominal and whose loyalties are somewhat tentative; the party bureaucracy who hold official positions in the organisation and the elite of the party who are in control of the decision-making process. At the same time, a distinction should be made between the function of a party which is to nominate candidates for office, to campaign and is successful to assume the responsibilities of governance and the objective of a pressure group, or lobby, for instance, that seeks to influence government in order to obtain laws compatible with its own special interests.

Generally, a political party has the following characteristics: membership, organisation and administration, goals and objectives and resources including funds, talent, electoral strength, and charismatic candidates, among others.

In Malaysia, ethnicity has been a primary determinant of the evolution and structure of political parties. Although political parties have been founded on a non-ethnic basis, such as the Malayan Communist Party, Gerakan, PAS and Parti Rakyat, the element of ethnicity has been a central element in the major component elements of the ruling political coalition, that is the Barisan Nasional. Ideology, as a basis for political organisation, seems to be losing its appeal. This is especially notable in the case of parties based on communist ideology or socialist principles. To some extent this can be attributed to the dynamics of the superpower competition between the United States of America and the Soviet Union and the consequent collapse of the Cold War.



The ethnic basis of political organisation in Malaysia can be explained by the social and political history of the Malay community and the immigrant communities, especially the Chinese and the Indians. Self-government in 1955 and the transfer of power in 1957, further intensified political organisation and ethnicity as a basis for such organisation. Since the end of the Second World War, the organisation of the major political parties was determined to a large extent by ethnic considerations. The formation of the Alliance coalition made up of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and the MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), laid a basis for intra-ethnic political cooperation and became the basis for the formation of an elected government. (The Alliance coalition was initially formed by a joint declaration made by Selangor branches of the United Malays National Organisation and the Malaysian Chinese Association, announcing that these two parties would contest the forthcoming Kuala Lumpur municipal elections together in a common front). These three political parties represented the major ethnic groups in the country. The widening of the Alliance coalition to become the Barisan Nasional in 1974 did not fundamentally alter this principle of intra-ethnic cooperation through political parties based on ethnicity. The Alliance and the Barisan Nasional have been in political power since 1955 and for the better part of it, have enjoyed a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

In view of the above facts, it cannot be denied that political parties have a primary responsibility in enhancing political awareness and participation. But this responsibility cannot be confined to political parties only. It has to be shared with other organisations. In order to understand the problems related to political awareness and participation among Indian women, a brief background of the MIC is necessary.

The MIC was formed in August 1946, and a month later, the women's section was formed. Today, the MIC has a total membership of about 300,000 of whom forty percent are women. There are approximately 2,000 branches. The MIC today, is the preeminent representative of the Indian community and shares political power with the other component elements of the Barisan Nasional. By comparison with many other parties which had an Indian ethnic base, the MIC has an effective infrastructure and has been successful in delivering the Indian votes for the Barisan Nasional electoral victories in the last two decades. While the MIC seeks to represent the entire Indian community, it has, over the years, become essentially representative of the Tamil community. This is reflected by the change in the leadership pattern where the last three presidents of the party has been Tamils and the membership of the party has become predominantly Tamil.

Although there has been some expression of dissatisfaction by other Indian minority groups, these facts essentially reflect the political and demographic reality. It has been estimated that the Tamil and Tamil speaking segment of the Indian community is more than eighty percent. A number of political observers have commented on this increasing assertion of the Tamil identity within the framework of the MIC. The Women's Section of the MIC has increasingly reflected this Tamil identity. This is a natural political development. Consequently, any discussion of the enhancement of political awareness and participation of Indian women, essentially means the enhancement of political awareness and participation among Tamil women.

The aims and objectives of the MIC Women's section, as stated in the by-laws are as follows:

- To foster social and political consensus amongst Malaysian Indian Women.
- To initiate and implement programmes and projects for the socio-economic progress of Malaysian Indian Women.
- To uphold the constitution and carry out the objectives of the Malaysian Indian Congress.
- To support and implement all decisions and directives of the President and the Central Working Committee.

In terms of women's participation in the political process, the National Women Leader is a member of the Central Working Committee and women members of the MIC have been appointed senators, municipal councillors and district councillors. Under the party constitution, at least two women must be elected at the branch level and at the state level, two women must be elected to the Exco. During Dato Seri Samy Vellu's tenure as President of the MIC, the women's section has been given due recognition. Generally, it can be stated that the participation of women within the MIC is at lower level in comparison to UMNO. This lower participation has been attributed by observers to a variety of reasons. These include among others, lack of education, the absence of family support, financial dependence, social constraints deriving from Indian customs and traditions, the absence of cooperation from male counterparts in the party, the lack of political commitment and efficacy on the part of some women leaders at various levels of the party and the absence of effective women leadership.

A major factor that has hindered the enhancement of political awareness among Indian women, is the diversion of political energy and resources to attempting to solve social problems that have become more

acute over the last decade. These problems include among others, child abuse, abandoned children, wife battering, alcoholism, suicide and prostitution. Consequently, the party's ability to focus on political action and enhancement of political awareness and participation within the female segment of the Indian community, is obstructed and reflected by the necessity to attend to increasingly urgent and serious problems. Essentially, there is a need for a national plan of action to attempt to solve these problems, not only among the Indian community but among all ethnic groups of the national population. At the same time, the MIC Women's Section has to consciously make the distinction between the party's role in alleviating social problems and its function in terms of the enhancement of political awareness and participation. This distinction has to be constantly borne in mind by the women political leadership, if there is to be any qualitative and quantitative upgrading of the level and intensity of political awareness and participation among Indian women.

Ethnicity as a factor in national politics and in international relations, has become a critical determinant. This has been manifested very sharply especially after the collapse of the Cold War. The break-up of Yugoslavia, the transition to democratic rule in South Africa, the civil conflict in Somalia and the bloodshed in Rwanda, all illustrate this dramatically and tragically. To ignore the fact of ethnicity or to paper over it with ideology and political platitudes can be a serious mistake.

Within this context, the Barisan Nasional has been effective in managing inter-ethnic tensions and strains. This management has laid the foundation for the country's prosperity and progress. In this respect, the MIC has played its role, though dissatisfaction has been voiced in some quarters about the absence of state support and programmes to deal effectively with a variety of socio-economic problems confronting the Indian community. This can be partly remedied by an increased level of political awareness and participation.

As the nation develops along the economic and social fronts, increased political awareness and participation will be a corollary that will be a feature in the exercise of political and civic rights among all communities in the country. The Indian community will likewise be affected by similar developments. It can be postulated that enhanced political awareness and participation will emerge with the widespread of secondary and tertiary education and increased economic well-being.

The increased participation of women in the various sectors of national life, is a global phenomenon and over the coming decades, this will be a

feature in many developing societies including Malaysia. In terms of political participation, women in Malaysia have made rapid progress. In so far as Indian women are concerned, the rate and pace of progress has to be intensified. In this area, the MIC and the Women's Section of the MIC, have an important role to play. However, whatever that role is and the definition of the limits of that role, the essential tasks and the commitments required will have to come from within the ranks of the women members of the MIC.

Vision 2020 envisages that "By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong, moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient". This vision to be realised has to overcome nine strategic challenges. As stated by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, "The first of these is the challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one 'Bangsa Malaysia' with political loyalty and dedication to the nation." For this vision to be realised, and for the first of these nine central strategic challenges to be overcome, various political parties and particularly those in the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition will have to make their contribution in a positive and constructive manner. This contribution will be dependent upon an enhanced and enlightened political awareness and participation among women.

For the MIC and for its women members, this particular challenge may benefit from the following responses in terms of enhanced political awareness and participation.

Firstly, the formulation and implementation of a programme of political education for the women members of the MIC. This programme of political education should seek to incorporate the elements of positive citizenship and a fundamental knowledge of the political rights and duties of citizenship. Further, any programme of political education must seek to inculcate a basic knowledge of the constitution and the structure and organisation of government.

Secondly, women members of the MIC have to be given increasingly higher levels of responsibility in the political arena. This will necessitate wider representation in the decision-making bodies of the MIC and also, increased opportunities of political participation and representation at the

municipal, state and parliamentary levels.

Thirdly, membership recruitment has to be intensified and this should aim at bringing a wider segment of professionals and semi-professionals into the ranks of the party membership. This infusion of new blood will be necessary for the party to effectively carry out its functions, particularly in those areas where the participation of women would be both essential and a prerequisite. At the same time, it should be recognised that other component parties in the Barisan Nasional are rapidly moving in this area and the MIC, in order to maintain a degree of political competitiveness, should not neglect development in this area. There are many areas of political action and social mobilisation where women have an advantage and consequently, this advantage should be developed.

Fourthly, a strategy of cooperative linkage should be developed between the MIC Women's Section and other Indian social organisations to deal with socio-economic problems that affect the Indian community. This cooperative linkage should be based on a principle of symbiotic thought and action. Aside from this, the MIC Women's Section should also actively collaborate with the other women's sections of the component parties of the Barisan Nasional, in terms of political empowerment and enhancement of political awareness among women. This strategy could prove to be a powerful one given the strength of the women's sections of some of the Barisan Nasional component parties.

All these responses and strategies can only be effective if there is a particular level of motivation and leadership at the highest levels of the MIC Women's Section. This motivation and leadership cannot be brought about just by wishful thought. It has to be conscious of the responsibilities that are rapidly emerging, given the pace of development and accelerated industrialisation that the country is undergoing. If such motivation and leadership is lacking, then it is the duty of the membership to bring about the conditions for the emergence of such leadership within the framework of the party constitution and the general principles of democracy.

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*Professor Murugesu Pathmanathan is with the Faculty of Economics & Administration at the University of Malaya where he lectures on Government and Foreign Policy.*

*Mrs Jaya Partiban is the General-Secretary of the Wanita MIC National. She is also the Chairman of Task Force on Missing Girls. Currently, she is the editor of the monthly magazine Thumaiyan.*

# FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION SYSTEM AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN

*Saliha Hassan*

## *Introduction*

For the purpose of today's brief discussion on formal and non-formal education in relation to the political development of women, I would like to state my position on some pertinent questions. Firstly, being a stranger at this stage to the finer conceptual variations of "education", I would like to tender basically a layman's understanding of "formal" and "non-formal" education system. Based on my own perception, an example of "formal" education is the formally structured and formulated education by the authorities. There is very little or no flexibility in any aspect of it. This includes tertiary education where some people claim to see some hints of autonomy. I also consider the religious *pondok* school system, especially popular among the rural Malays before Independence (1957), and the contemporary semi-structured private religious centres of learning in the current Malaysian era of Islamic resurgence, as semi-formal.

In the context of this paper, I regard a non-formal education to include every other form of education ranging from personal experiences in life to political socialisation experienced through interactions with family, peer group, mass media organisations and others.

Secondly, aware of the lack of consensus on the parameters and ingredients of "political development", I refer to it as the general attitude towards political issues and activities, level of political participation, and capacity to influence political decision. The latter, I consider to be the peak of political development, which in this paper refers to the political development of women. And, I am not referring only to the occasional appearance of a lady premier here and there in the world. I am thinking of a sustained and effective influence of women on major political decisions that would bring about positive and meaningful changes for women in society.

Thirdly, depending on the experiences unique to each country, "development" is sometimes synonymous with "modernisation" or even "westernisation". Development may also be quite divorced from

modernisation and westernisation. In political development, it could mean a retrogressive development, for example, from a democratic system to repressive authoritarianism; or it could also mean a change towards a conservative and traditional mode of political life, which need not necessarily be worse. At the same time, modernisation, or westernisation does not necessarily result in the replacement of the old by the new, or the east by the west. Neither is it always mutually exclusive; or one that results in conflict. In many nations, perhaps not so different from ours, political development accommodates modernisation, westernisation and indigenous, traditional elements.

In the developing and less industrialised nations, such as Malaysia, there seems to be a continuous dialogue on women issues yet without radically feminist movements as evident in some other nations. In these countries too, it has been observed generally that political development as a whole is a cause as well as a consequence of various types of social change. Education plays the role of a causal link between social and political development.

### *Education, Political Awareness and Political Participation*

Education may instill awareness of new goals and aspirations, democratic rights, and responsibilities of government to its citizens. Education also results in higher expectation of these goals and aspirations. This includes political efficacy which can only be achieved if there is effective political participation. Most research findings in the area show that education, in general, leads to higher political awareness. There are also some inspiring examples, such as Abraham Lincoln who taught himself to read; Raden Adjeng Kartini, the Indonesian role model and source of inspiration for the emancipation of women; and Kusunose Kita, the Japanese woman who forced the popular rights movement of Japan to include women's issues on its agenda. Since popular democracy became the mode of political process in the country, a significant number of women political activists were teachers. However, does education really lead to increase in political participation?

Some research findings have observed that economic growth, as indicated by urbanisation, growth of secondary groups (economic and social), expansion of white collar class, seemed to lead to greater political participation among members of the society that they dealt with. Others have recorded how activities of non-political organisations and groups seemed to result in political participation. An example is the first formal

organisation for women in Singapore—the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which was formed in 1875 by Sophia Cooke. It began with religious and social activities for its members but later became a forum for the role of women in society. Way back in 1938, they had organised a conference on the status and role of women in society.

The YWCA must have also opened its doors to women of other races and religion because it seemed that a number of Malay women, later activists in other organisations, were associated with YWCA. However, for most other Malay women during the early 1940s, their political awareness, and therefore, their political participation, was inspired by the general anti-colonial movement for independence that was taking place in Indonesia and Malaya. The prominent examples are the radical *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (AWAS), which was the women's wing of *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM), and *Pergerakan Kaum Ibu* UMNO, the women's wing of the moderate United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). These differ from the organisations formed by women of other races. Theirs were generally non-political although at this time some were alleged to be involved with underground political activities. Nonetheless, practically all of the organisations, political or otherwise, tended to be racially based.

As with the *Pergerakan Wanita* UMNO, we shall find that although it was politically motivated and formed as a political organisation, the first task its members set themselves was the promotion of education, beginning with literacy for its members. In fact, the promotion of education has remained one of its continuing commitments. For example, the *Pergerakan Wanita* UMNO awards the best Malay female student in the Department of Political Science, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the annual *Anugerah Pingat Mas Wanita* UMNO. This indicates the *Pergerakan*'s acknowledgement of education as a significant key to political development. Certainly, being "well-educated" seems to be one common characteristic of women's political organisations.

In general, since its establishment in 1949, the *Pergerakan* has maintained its lead as the dominant woman political organisation in the country. Its sister rival, the *Dewan Muslimat* PAS which is the women's wing of the *Parti Islam Se Malaysia*, was reported to have referred to it as a yardstick of their own progress. A delegate at their 1993 national congress, or *muktamar*, was reported to have demanded a more active role for women members and for the male leaders to emulate their UMNO counterparts in getting their wives involved in the party's struggle (Sunday Star, 13 June 1993). As a political observer I am of the opinion that the *Pergerakan* deserves greater representation at the state and national levels, judging



from the numbers and the dedication of its members, as well as its political clout in the party. By now, at least one more Naib Presiden post should have been allotted to women as fair representation and recognition from the parent body of its role and contribution in the party. Echoing the same sentiment over the lack of representation of women in political leadership was the Secretary-General of *Wanita MCA*, Ooi Saw Choo. She was reported to have expressed regret at the 1993 Malaysian Chinese Association's (MCA) Annual General Assembly in Kuala Lumpur, that although *Wanita MCA* members comprised 30% of the total MCA members, representation in Parliament and State Assemblies, as well as district and town councils was not in proportion to their membership (*New Straits Times*, 26 June 1993). Ooi also re-affirmed *Wanita MCA*'s efforts to seek equal status for women.

The male dominated political leadership is yet to encourage more women to participate more actively in the decision making process at the higher echelon of the party machinery. Women, especially Malay women, have certainly shown a high degree of awareness, interest and participation in politics. However, despite some ministerial portfolios of national importance given to women, and a degree of presence accorded them in the bureaucratic top decision-making level, their numbers are still limited to render much impact on political decisions, or government policies that are meaningful and significant to women's interests and needs in society. In Malaysia, this state of affairs cannot be attributed to a lack of qualified women candidates to fill in important decision-making positions.

### *Education and Political Development of Women*

Education, especially formal education, has assisted in the political development of women particularly in raising political awareness. However, in the area of political participation, there are other factors that may be more influential than formal education. For that matter, informal education plays a more significant role. Prominent *Wanita MIC* leader, Devaki Krishnan, herself a teacher before deciding on a full-time political career, stressed the role of the informal. The push factor was her first political experience at the age of nine years old when she was with her mother in Sri Lanka. She had enjoyed the first-hand experience participating in pre-election poster campaigns (*Majalah Wanita*, August 1984, p. 48). In Malaysia, she not only rose to prominence in the Malaysian political scene, but also had the distinction of being the only woman candidate (and won too) in the country's First Legislative Election in 1954. She, however, found it difficult to recruit Indian women to join the party.

She observed that it is the subordination of women in the Indian culture that causes the lack of participation in political activities.

The MCA Secretary-General, Datuk Dr. Ting Chew Peh, believes that attitude and not education is the major factor in political development. While calling for greater involvement from the English-speaking Chinese, Datuk Dr. Ting also expressed the opinion that formal education of no less than the tertiary level does not necessarily encourage political participation. He said that not enough Chinese professionals, especially women, "join politics" because of the "middle class attitude of being satisfied with life" (New Straits Times, 26 June 1993). If this happens among the highly educated, what is the situation among the lesser educated? A research conducted by Arun A/L Boon Tiang (1990/1991) on the Siamese minority in Kedah soon after the 1990 General Election, showed the following results:-

### *Education*

67.8% of respondents had no formal schooling but only primary education; 68.8% of the women were in this category and most of them were housewives; 79.2% of the housewives never read newspapers and 66.7% of them never listened to the radio or watched television; only 24.5% of the men fell into this category.

### *Political Awareness*

An index of political awareness which tested knowledge of local and national leaders, political parties and general political issues found 65.7% women scored 'low' while only 26.5% men fell into this category. It is perhaps heartening to note that 88.9% of women aged between 21-30 scored 'high' on political awareness.

### *Political Participation*

95.8% of the housewives never attended any political meeting even during the election campaign period; 85.7% of them never discussed political issues with their families. Despite the above scores, only 20.8% of the women did not go out to vote. There is no gender-breakdown for "reasons for casting votes", but the overall results showed that out of 72.6% respondents who cast their votes, 20.1% thought that it was a duty, 23.1% did so because of campaign promises, 21.0% because they were party sympathisers, and 8.4% for fear of breaking some laws.

Arul's findings did not isolate education as such, but they do give support to the assumptions made earlier, that formal education has a high correlation with political awareness but seems to have a low one with political participation. In this sample, factors other than education could have influenced political participation. Some speculations can be made that some of these are cultural, whereby women are not active participants in public life. Pressures of household duties and chores, lack of concern with politics and failure to understand the significance of political participation in their life could have some influence on the respondents.

### Reflections

Political participation is not only an important index to measure women's political development but also to measure the general status of women in society, and society's development as a whole. This paper does not analyse women's participation as candidates in the general elections, in the *Jemaah Menteri* (Cabinet), the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives), the *Dewan Negara* (Senate), or the State Assemblies. It is definitely important to identify issues relating to women in politics, for example, political recruitment by political players including individuals and political parties. It is also worthwhile to explore the potentials of formal education. In conclusion, the problems of political development, whether in gender terms or otherwise, revolve around the relationships between the political culture, the authoritative structures and the general political process.

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## MALE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

*Ismail Mustapa*

**I**n discussing this subject on women's participation in politics, I cannot claim to represent all the men. Men never see eye-to-eye on a lot of subjects. There are as many opinions as there are males in this world. I am positive that it will be the same for women. Gender is irrelevant.

Whatever views that I express here at this gathering, rightly or wrongly, are my personal views, and of course I will be responsible — and I stand corrected.

What is politics? It is often referred to as "the science and art of Government" and to me this covers a lot of territory. It is all encompassing. In fact, I believe it is at the core of everything we do—it is a part of our daily life. It affects you and I and everybody else too. Whether you like it or not, whether you participate or not, it is there and it will continue to exist. So what choice is there for all of us - males or females. Since we are affected by politics, consciously or otherwise, we might as well get involved in it—consciously and conscientiously. Presently, indications are that the Government is becoming more and more collaborative and participative in nature. So, we should respond and open the door wider, and participate in politics. At least we will be part of the decision making process.

I cannot help noticing some worrying traits. Women tend to shy away from the limelight for various reasons. Maybe it is upbringing, or culture. Women are expected to be feminine and demure, and they do not wish to be branded "aggressive". While women have a need to feel special, there also exists the conflicting desire not to be a threat to their male colleagues. And of course, there is also this nagging fear of sex discrimination. All these would not do if women want to participate in politics.

We have just discussed two salient points. One, that there is no other choice but to participate in politics, or at least be politically aware of what's going on in the country. Secondly, that gender has no bearing on participation in politics. If, as an individual, you have what it takes — go ahead, climb on to the bandwagon.

The whole idea is to create political awareness among women, especially on issues pertaining to and concerning women. In my view, women do have a role in politics—and I hasten to add, an important role at that. Go right ahead and do what you have to do in defense or in furtherance of women's rights, but it would be quite unwise to overstep the bounds of decency. Anyway, not to the extent of burning bras as is being espoused by women's liberation movements in the West. That is a mockery to your own gender, and is incongruent with the values of the East.

To me, participation in politics means having a say in affairs affecting our daily lives. It doesn't really matter at what level that may be. The important thing is to be able to exert some influence, one way or the other, depending on your own inclination in the decision making process. And to me there are two available options:

- To be a full-scale politician and work through the party network; and
- To maintain status quo - but work through all available channels to get your views across

The first option is very clear. But being a full-time politician, in my opinion, is not as easy as it seems. Many people aspire to be one, and just as many have had their fingers burnt, or fell on the wayside. There are also quite a number who just continue to exist without any meaningful contribution towards uplifting the social well-being of the citizens. To be a politician, first and foremost, there must be a genuine interest in politics, the affairs of state, of standing up and be counted, of wanting to improve the human lot, of making the nation and the world a better place to live in.

We often hear, and even meet, people who go into politics and run for office just because it is the trend to do so, or just to be in the 'circle' so to speak, without even knowing what politics are all about. But worst of all those who knowingly enter politics for self-interest.

There are quite a number of politicians—the male species especially—who fall into that category. What a pity! So, if the males are in politics for the wrong reasons, it does not necessarily mean that women folk too should follow suit because two wrongs do not make one right.

Having said all that, I sincerely believe that given the Malaysian context, there is still a lot of room left for more women's participation and representation in politics. It must, however, be understood that representation here does not necessarily mean just numbers. Because 50%

of Malaysia's population comprises of women, it does not mean that 50% of the cabinet members must be women. Similarly, membership in political parties too does not necessarily mean just making up the numbers - it is active participation that counts. I remember someone said the party does not want women members to be active only for the purpose of carrying the '*bunga manggar*' (a creative version of a type of blossom derived from the coconut palm) whenever there are visiting dignitaries, but quickly fade away into being passive by-standers—where and when it really matters. That is not the kind of active participation in politics we are talking about, are we?

We are talking about standing up and being counted; we are talking about putting across our views; we are talking about the ability to exert some influence on matters that are going to affect our daily lives somehow, we are talking about penetrating into the decision-making process—at the highest level if possible.

Therefore, it is very much dependent upon what you really are capable of—your capacity to deliver—as a woman! Politics call for full commitment; politics demand sacrifices, time, money, etc. and a willingness not only to speak up but also to listen! So search your souls, ladies. If you have what it takes—the doors are wide open.

But what are the fields that women are best suited for? Instantaneously, the first thing that comes to my mind is welfare services, maybe because we have had a woman Minister in charge of the Ministry for quite some time. But is that the only portfolio suitable for women? What about consumer affairs, education, trade, and who says women cannot excel in finance? What about science and technology, law, etc? Look and delve into other fields which up to this point have always been dominated by men. Therein lies the real challenge.

Imagine a woman Minister for Defence or a woman Minister for Religious Affairs! Given the present scenario, these two areas may be just off limits. But that does not mean women cannot contribute significantly in the fields of defence and religious affairs. After all, it has been proven again and again that women can indeed go as far and as high as becoming the prime minister of a country—the latest being Kim Campbell, the Prime Minister of Canada.

Well, so much for the first option—the full-time, full-fledged politician. Women do have an important role to play in politics in this country, and they can play that role successfully if they put their hearts and souls into

it. there is plenty of room for both women and men in politics.

I am sure you would agree with me that politics is dirty. But you do not have to be dirty to participate in politics. A number of people also say - if you can't fight them, join them—my advice is DON'T! Just drop out and make this world one rogue less, please! In fact, more and more people are saying NO TO DIRTY POLITICS, I am sure politics will be less and less dirty. So why not women take the lead, join in and for starters, clean up politics.

The second option is maintaining the status quo. If you choose not to become a full-time politician, you can stay on in your profession and yet take an active part in politics. It is the political awareness that counts most. There is so much you can do. At the very least, you can contribute your views for the betterment of the country, for the social well-being of the people, for human kind and the environment. As professionals, I am sure your views and opinions can influence political thinking and, therefore, the decision-making process.

Perhaps this is the better option for women. The sacrifices are definitely lesser, but the net impact can be more satisfying and meaningful. The question is finding the right channel(s) to put your views across. The easiest and nearest would be your own professional associations, societies, guilds, institutes or other such bodies. As a matter of fact, I believe, they can be the best vehicles to make your presence felt.

I mentioned earlier that there are indications that the government of the day is becoming more and more collaborative and participative in nature, and this augurs well for the future. As an example, several budget dialogue sessions have been lined up across the country and at each meeting, professional bodies are invited to put forth their views on matters that directly concern them or are closely related to them. That is a very good channel, to say the least. Whether all the views are eventually accepted or not is totally a different matter. The important thing is that the power-that-be are willing to listen and take your views into consideration. It is therefore involving you in the process.

The second channel must be the mass media. They are there for you. They need you more than you can imagine - language is no barrier too. The press will definitely be too glad to have you say something they can splash across the front pages the next morning. There is radio for you to be heard, and on TV you get to be seen too.

Alternatively, as the third channel if you like, you can still talk to your



local representative—the politician—but make sure it is the genuine one. Otherwise, you yourself might as well be the politician—that's taking the first option.

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I would like to share with you what Nancy Woodhull says in her article "Women and Power: the audience of the future" (Quill magazine, September 1992). She describes women's groups, as the new emerging power brokers. And she in turn quoted Jean Gaddy Wilson of the University of Missouri who said "Women's participation in society today is like a tsunami. A tsunami is a tidal wave caused by earthquakes under the sea. In the open ocean a tsunami is hardly noticeable. Similarly women's opinions blend into general trends and are hardly noticeable in daily life.

But a tsunami is a huge force of moving water. When it rolls against the bottom close to shore it becomes steeper and more powerful. When women confront an issue where they see real clarity of purpose and meet real resistance to change they are like a tsunami.

A tsunami can sweep a shore line clean of rigid structures, but ships in harbour with enough anchor cable can survive its force. Smart companies today are learning how to respect and ride the women's tsunamis. The rigid structures, unable to adapt to the changing needs of a society where women play an increasingly important role, may just be swept away.

### *About the Editors*

Dr Robert Haas studied law, politics and sociology at the University of Kiel and Hamburg in Germany. He holds a doctorate in law and was an assistant professor and judge. Since 1980 he has been working for the German Government in the field of development assistance. In Africa, he was a personal adviser to the Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism in Swaziland. Since 1991 he has been the Resident Representative of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Malaysia. Currently, Dr Haas is Deputy Head of the East and South East Asia office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, based in Singapore.

Dr Rahmah Hashim is a lecturer in the Department of Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She has been teaching communication and broadcasting since 1982. Rahmah holds a Ph.D. in telecommunications from The Ohio State University, USA. She was an AMERITECH Graduate Fellow at The Ohio State University in 1988/1989. From 1991 to 1993, she held the post of Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.