Malaysian Women in the Modern Era

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Abstract

This article attempts to examine the position of the Malaysian women in the present context of capitalist development and fast rate of industrialization in Malaysia, and raises the question, 'Does a common notion of the modern Malaysian woman exist?'

The first part examines critically the lack of women's representation in all institutions of society. The lack of representation especially at the important decision-making levels has disadvantaged the majority of women.

The second part proposes that women are also disadvantaged in the domestic sphere, where the main tasks and responsibilities are borne by women irrespective of class, although some variation naturally exists between these women.

The third part then looks at the roles and achievements of women's NGOs. They have succeeded in bringing about new laws (e.g. the Domestic Violence Act) and amendments to others (e.g. the rape laws). There appears, in fact, to be a closer partnership between the government and women's NGOs over women's issues. Furthermore, they have brought much-needed services for female victims of violence, and have educated the public on women's issues.

The last part discusses the modern capitalist, consumerist and religious culture, which constructed the image and role of women. Conformity to the dictates of such structures lends support to the philosophy of expediency and acceptability for most Malay women.

Introduction

Malaysia is known in the surrounding region as a fast-developing country, bringing economic prosperity and a better quality of life to its people. Over the past few years its growth rate has remained constant between 8% and 10%, elevating its status to one of the 'dragon' or 'tiger' countries of this region. With regard to the population of 18 million, the female/male ratio is almost equal, although men still marginally outnumber the women (Family Planning Board data sheet 1989). The modernization of Malaysian

society is equated with industrialization and urbanization. In the 1990s, many urban centres have emerged and at present over 65% of the population are urban residents. The majority are engaged in industrial and service sector employment while the remaining 20-23% are engaged in agriculture-related occupations. Women formed 47.1% of the total workforce in 1995, marking a slight rise from 45.8% in 1990 (*7th Malaysia Plan Report*). Only 28% of the working women are in agriculture while the rest are now engaged in both the industrial and service sectors.

In general the country has developed a good infrastructure, which augers well for business growth and expansion. The most recent developments are the north-south highway which facilitates transportation, and the creation of the multimedia super corridor. Communication is seen as essential because 'communication is needed to handle the barrage of new foreign and local investment and business' (K.L. Stock Exchange and Malaysia Consultancy, 1992). Besides the importation of technology by international agreements (Beaumont 1989), to accelerate the formation of higher technology and skills, much effort has also been made by the government, business companies and the universities to improve their research and development. Taking the above factors into account, it can be concluded that Malaysia has now attained the status of a modern country.

Such massive economic changes have resulted in social transformation as well. Therefore how do we locate women within this society in transition, and how do we consider what is a modern woman; or is there a spectrum of modern women? What are the characteristics and role of women as compared to men in Malaysian society? In relation to the position and status of women in Malaysian society, several other questions are raised: besides earning wages: what are the other effects of modernization and industrialization? Are there any substantial changes to their social position in the public and private-domestic spheres? Besides the economic criteria, how does one locate their position in a social-cultural milieu where ethnicity, religion and class interact dependently to determine one's social position? Is there any marked variation in the position of Chinese, Indian and Malay women? Or do they share common interests and problems because of many similar life experiences within the context of Malaysia?

Theoretical Perspective

This article examines the issues stated above in an attempt to illuminate the various positions of women in the country. Although there are many complexities and divisions faced by the modern women here owing to the multiracial and multireligious composition of this pluralist society, yet there are many strands connecting Malaysian women. For instance, they are all subject to civil and criminal laws, and Syariah laws for Muslim women; women are the main victims of 'gender' crimes such as rape and domestic violence; finally they are all subject to certain myths, prejudices and perceptions regarding women's domestic roles and gender characteristics, including notions of femininity, propriety and virtue.

Patriarchal gender relations have been laid down since the coming of early Islam in the 13th century, followed by the British colonial powers in the 19th century. Before the advent of Islam, gender relations were determined by customary Malay laws where property and inheritance rights were equal and domicile after marriage was bilateral rather than patriarchally unilateral (Hong 1983: 9; Azizah 1985: 48; Jamilah 1994: 3) After Islamization and the implementation of the patriarchal Adat Temenggong, inequality particularly in family laws, began to emerge. An example of such inequality could be seen in inheritance laws, where female children received one-third while the son inherited two-thirds of an estate.

The British colonial government further exacerbated existing patriarchal relations. As stated by Walby (1986), 'The state is a site of patriarchal relations which is necessary to patriarchy as a whole. The state represents patriarchal as well as capitalist interests and furthers them in action.' The British government controlled the major rubber plantations and tin mines in the country and mainly employed the early Chinese and Indians immigrants as waged workers in these two industries. Within the mode of agriculture production, women workers were paid less than men in most estates (Labour Department Report 1933) and with the advent of technology and more agricultural machinery, the British masters trained men to run the machines and to organize cooperatives. Rural women were taught home economics to make them better wives and mothers, although in reality women were occupied in agricultural production (see Hong 1983: 1-10; Dancz 1987). Thus as Rogers (1980: 29-41) emphasized in her observation of many developing countries, the

colonial government tended to segregate men and women in their training and development planning.

When Malaysia attained political independence from the British in 1957, the policy of unequal pay between men and women was continued by the government until the struggles by women's groups and trade unions succeeded in achieving equality in pay for all government employees in 1969 (see Rohana 1997: 58-60). Patriarchal notions that the man is the main breadwinner of the family (particularly strong before the 1990s) perpetuated unequal wages in the private sector until the late 1980s (Ministry of Human Resource, Reports from 1980-90). Therefore, women were situated within a capitalist-patriarchal labour market situation where equal work resulted in unequal remuneration.

When the government embarked on the export-oriented industrialization programmes in the early 1970s after the 'failure' of the import substitution industries to generate employment opportunities for over 9% of unemployed youth, thousands of young women migrated from the rural areas and became workers in the new textiles, electronics, electrical, food and footwear industries. At this time when young women were beginning to achieve economic independence, another major event was happening, i.e. the wave of fundamentalist Islam that swept throughout Pakistan, Iran and Malaysia. Women's position and their roles were redefined, and amongst many other norms and behaviour, emphasis was placed on their responsibilities in the domestic sphere. They were encouraged to cover their body in accordance with Islamic prescriptions (see Zaniah 1987; Sisters in Islam 1993). The relationship between this new Islamic patriarchal force and that of state patriarchy was sometimes conflictual but on most occasions there was concurrence. The tacit agreement between them was that the main role of women was as wives and mothers in the domestic sphere. The disagreement was on the labour of women, because the government wanted women to be workers in the labour market while the fundamentalists preferred women to stay at home. This was somehow resolved when the organs of state propaganda emphasized that although a woman may go out to work, she must be able to balance work and duties in both the domestic and public sphere. The promotion of the 'happy family and caring society' campaign by the government through the Family Planning Board and media in the 1980s laid emphasis on the

role of women (and men) as responsible parents and spouses. Therefore, women are constantly reminded by both the government and Islamic patriarchal ideology to conform to their concept of a good mother, wife and waged worker.

Contextual Reality of Malaysian Women

In order to understand the complexities of modern Malaysian women, we have to contextualize their position both in the public and private spheres. Women's status in the public sphere will be contextualized with respect to their participation and representation at the higher levels of societal institutions such as politics, economics, religion and education. It is here that important decisions are made regulating policies, laws, work and norms of everyday relations. It is important, too, to examine their role in the other non-formalized public spheres such as NGOs. Here, their participation as female citizens to create democratic spaces and improvements for women is linked to the socio-political system. The domestic sphere reveals more of the gender relations and roles which are to a large extent governed by the various laws (family, criminal and civil laws), and by customary norms and behaviour.

Women's Representation in the Public Sphere

Women have played an important role in the waves of political and economic changes that have swept the country: in the 1950s struggling for independence against British colonial rule; in the late 1960s, pouring out in thousands from the rural areas to work in the factories of the Free Industrial Zones. Before then, many hundreds worked in the mines and rubber estates owned mainly by British capitalists, while some women worked in educational establishments, hospitals and municipalities. Large-scale migration of women from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s from rural to urban areas caused a demographic shift of women and affected both the labour market composition and the occupational hierarchy in the workplace. The higher female urban composition *vis-à-vis* males, and the higher presence of Malay females in factory work, testify to this (see Jamilah 1994: 9-20).

As stated earlier, at present, women make up 47% of the labour force (Ministry of Human Resource Report 1996) while in past decades their contribution steadily increased from 15% in the 1950s and 1960s to 35% in the 1970s and 1980s. However, many remained

largely unskilled and semi-skilled workers and over 80% are located at the bottom half of the occupational hierarchy. Only about 8% of the professional category are women.

The large numbers of workers in the factories of the Free Industrial Zones have remained unorganized or ununionized. There are fewer unionized women workers compared to male workers (only 10% of woman workers joined unions). Women who join unions are mainly involved in enterprise unions (or in-house unions) and a majority are ordinary union members. Only 7% of union leaders are women. Although some electronic factories have sanctioned the formation of in-house unions in the past few years, the attempts of electronics workers to form a national union has been thwarted repeatedly by the Registrar of Trade Unions (and Minister of Human Resources) over the last 15 years or so. If they could form a national union, they would be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, union in the country. Because a large number of the factory women are required to work the three-shift system, they have hardly time and energy to be involved in union activities. Furthermore after marriage, due to heavy domestic responsibilities and the disapproval of some husbands, the number of married women actively involved in unions drops drastically (Rohana and Lockhead 1988; Rohana 1997).

The position of female students has improved greatly since the 1950s with the introduction of universal education in the country, consisting today of about 50% in the lower secondary schools. They exceeded boys in the social sciences and arts at the tertiary levels. Most primary school teachers and trainees are women (see Jamilah 1994: 54-71; Lee 1995). But in engineering and technology-based courses, female students are in the minority. In the educational bureaucracy, as top administrators and executives from levels of the ministry, tertiary (universities and colleges), secondary and primary schools, women comprised around 10% (see Women and Human Resource Unit (UPWSM) data sheet, 1993).

In politics too, women fared rather well as voters but quite poorly at the leadership level. Around 1986, 49.7% of women went out to vote and in 1990, 53.0% did so. The number of women fielded as candidates by their political parties was as follows: 27 women contested in 1982; 29 women in 1986; and 36 women in 1990. They all achieved over 90% success rates, a much higher success rate than

their male counterparts which fared around 70-75%. For these same years the percentage of women in parliament and state was relatively low and representation was as follows: 5.4% in 1982; 4.5% in 1986; and 4.9% in 1990. However there has been a slight change in the male-female ratio in parliament as follows: 51:1 in 1955; 34:1 in 1964; 30:1 in 1974; and 18:1 in 1982.

The following chart shows the number of seats held by women in the House of Representatives and Senate from 1955-95. It clearly shows women's representation in parliament as rather poor, barely reaching 8% in 1995. When compared to the world average of 11.3% (*Sunday Star*, 8.9.1996), this is relatively low. It certainly reveals a paucity of female representation in view of their enormous contribution to the political processes of national election, membership and government.

Table 1: Women in Parliament, 1955-95
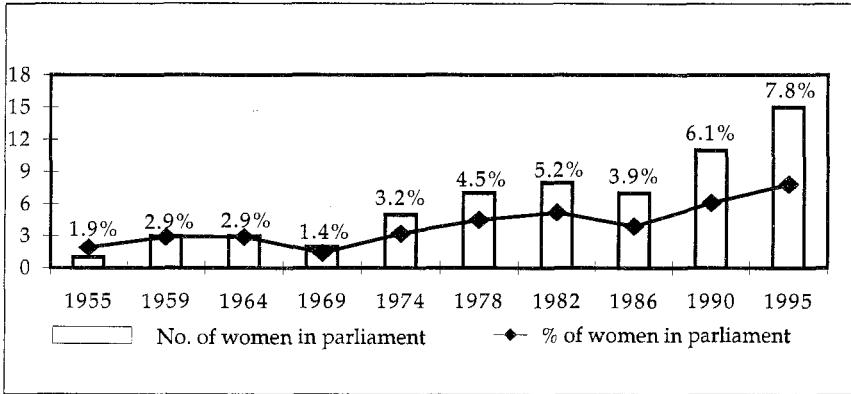
In terms of women members in the three major political parties, they were grossly underrepresented in the party leadership, although they made up quite a substantial number, especially in UMNO. Taking 1988 as an example: UMNO has 600,000 women members out of 1,5000,000 (40%); the MCA has 97,200 from a total of 486,000 (20%); and Gerakan has 30,000 of a total of 140,000 (21.0%). Again it clearly reflects an underrepresentation of women at the leadership level where important decisions are made.

In addition 'there is pitiful female representation in government agencies such as the city, town and district council and religious councils' (*Sunday Star*, 8.9.1995). Moreover in the public sector such

as the general manager of state development corporations, state secretaries, university vice chancellors and general managers of privatized bodies such as Tenaga and Telecoms, women have not been appointed.

A similar picture emerges in the upper echelons of most other social institutions such as the media, judiciary, finance, economy and religion. Only in educational institutions are women slightly better represented (above the average of 10%). Thus it can be said that although the contribution of women has increased tremendously in most walks of life, yet their representation in the public and private sectors, especially at the decision-making levels, is low. This is also true in terms of women as policy-makers in the public and government sectors. Most societal institutions, especially the media, are owned by dominant political parties or men (who are either wealthy or politically connected or both). Thus in reality, gender relations and characteristics are largely constructed by a predominantly male ideology strongly attached to class and religious influence. The lack of women in higher decision-making to a large extent has marginalized women's issues in development, policies, legislation, education and the media.

Women in the Domestic Sphere

As the public sphere influences the private domain, so the reverse is true to a lesser extent: the position of women is determined by their earning capacity, religion and the socio-economic status of the family. Whether the 'housewife' ideology and practices pertain equally for women of all classes and ethnicities is debatable, as specific or higher-income groups have more options to delegate housework to others, by employing domestic (mainly immigrant) staff. It is becoming expensive to hire any form of domestic help as agency and visa fees have risen beyond the ability and capacity of the average income earner. Housework and responsibilities are still mainly borne by women. Studies conducted in rural settlements, villages and estates testify that women do most of the housework and bear responsibility for most of the childrearing (Mazidah, Hing and Rokiah 1979; Oorjitham 1987; Rokiah 1989). Even professional women tend to carry out most of the work and bear most responsibility in the family (Meera and Rohana 1993). These studies agreed that the main responsibilities and implementation of household chores are taken on by women, while the husbands

normally 'help' out in specific areas of housework such as sometimes tending to the child and going to market.

In spite of more women earning wages outside the home and some commanding higher wages than their spouses, the belief prevails in most Malaysian families that it is the man who is still the main breadwinner and leader of the family. This is reinforced by most of the diverse religious mores within in the country. If the leadership of the male is threatened or questioned, it could lead to domestic violence where he would beat his wife so as 'to teach her a lesson' (see Rohana and Samuel 1995). Domestic violence had existed for a long time but has only recently been recognized as a criminal act and a social problem by the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act (1996) after a long, 10-year concerted struggle by women's NGOs. More cases of this kind have been reported in recent years and this is owing to several factors such as the presence of women's NGOs to help and support them and the general awareness of their rights. (This is discussed in detail later.)

The position of the female child in the family is related to the family's compositional makeup. In recent years rape by fathers, stepfathers and relatives is on the increase (see Hadi 1997: Royal Police Malaysia (PDRM) reports of rape over the last few years). For example in 1995 and 1996 there were respectively 173 and 200 cases of reported incest cases (*Sun*, 14.6.1997). Furthermore in recent years more than 60% of rape victims are below the age of 16 years.

Figures on runaway children also show that girls run away more than boys and that fewer return to the family (*Sunday Star*, 25.7.1993; PDRM report 1995). The main reasons why girls run away is because some parents impose more restrictions and regulations on their daughters than on their sons. Many Malaysian families still practise the authoritarian style of bringing up the children, where the rationale for restrictions is for the 'protection' of the girl and where the authority of the father is not to be questioned. The father is often either 'respected', revered or feared by the children. Children in general are afraid to assert their rights and in no position to say 'no' to unwelcome sexual advances of the father or other adults. Girls below the age of 21 years do not enjoy other basic rights outside the home: for example, if they are arrested under the Women and Girls Protection Act (1973), they will be sent to a detention centre. Cases of

girls arrested in karaoke lounges and night-spots have received some publicity recently (*Star*, 5.5.1997)

Family-life issues such as those concerning marriage, divorce, guardianship, inheritance, citizenship and related areas have been shown to be biased towards men. (see Women and Human Resource Unit, 1996). Under Muslim law, this includes the right of the man to establish a polygamous relationship and family. Needless to say many psychologists admitted that due to the stress of trying to balance wage and household responsibilities (as well as the inequity of the laws governing family life), married women are more prone to mental illness and depression than men. A study in Penang seems to verify this situation (Mubarak *et al*. 1996).

The domestic sphere came under criticism since housework is seen as unpaid labour by many women's groups. Not only is women's labour unpaid at home, even when they work as a helper in the farm or family enterprises, their labour is not counted in the Gross National Product. Thus women's labour has been devalued in all national reports in the past and some rectification is now acknowledged as necessary by the government.

Rapid economic development and education may bring about changes in the domestic position of the women, in the gender relations and in the division and remuneration of labour. However, at present the situation remains quite stable, partly due to reinforcement by the revival of conservatism in many religions.

Women's NGOs and Empowerment

In the process of economic development, where less consideration has been paid to social inequality and its consequences, crimes and social problems have increased over the years. One example of this is the increasing number of crimes against women. Murder and other violations against women have increased generally within the context of the 10% increase in the crime index over the last few years. To help women and possibly to empower them, the 1980s saw the emergence of many women's crisis centres in the urban areas - Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Kucing and Kota Kinabalu.[1] Unlike earlier women's organizations, these NGOs viewed gender relations and patriarchy more critically. At the same time, by setting up help-centres they attempt to provide psychological and physical support

for victims of violence, nearly all of whom are women (whereas the perpetrators are largely men). Other newer women's organizations have a variety of functions, including the provision of resource centres for women. The latter deal mainly with factory women and include organizations such as Arrow, Tenaganita, and Friends of Women in the capital city. The leadership of these organizations is mainly urban, English-educated, middle-class women and their services are primarily utilized by women from the lower socio-economic groups (see Rohana and Samuel 1995; Women's Aid Organization (WAO) Study 1995; Royal Police Reports - several years; annual reports of WAO and Women's Crisis Centre (WCC) from 1989-96). The latest support system to be initiated by women's NGOs is the setting up of one-stop crisis centres at the major hospitals in the country. This is mainly to facilitate the process of helping and treating the victims (women) of violence (Abu Hassan 1996; Violence against Women Committee File 1994-95). Before 1997, there existed only three such one-stop centres and after this initiative, the Ministry of Health has seen fit to direct the main hospitals to establish similar set-ups.

Why then are women and girls increasingly becoming victims of violence, as seen in the rise in the number of rape cases including incest, from about 600 in 1980s to over 1,000 in 1996 (PDRM reports from 1985-96)? Similarly in domestic violence cases, more and more cases are reported each year. Other violations against women include sexual harassment, which occurs but is not officially acknowledged because women are afraid to come forward.[3] It has become known, however, through the grapevine among employees in factories, offices, hotels and other workplaces. Harassment in other forms is carried out by the state and religious authorities by arresting young women from nightspots and karaoke lounges and sending them to detention centres. These incidents have been publicized recently when six women were arrested and their parents were not informed of their detention in Batu Gajah (*Star*, May 1997). Powers of arrest and detention were given to the welfare officers and magistrates under the Women and Girls Protection Act, 1973. Although the Act clearly specified that these women can be arrested if soliciting or in danger of being made a prostitute by a brothel keeper (see section 7, part iii of the Act), yet an arrest can be made by the arbitrary interpretations of the state officials. Even though the

girls may be released later on, one cannot deny the trauma these young victims undergo (from being arrested, shoved away into a police van, kept in the police cells and then transported to the detention centres).

Women's NGOs have been putting their strategies into effect through advocacy work and have succeeded in bringing about a better deal for women in the 1989 laws related to rape. The other success, as mentioned earlier, was the introduction of the Domestic Violence Act (1996). There has been some contention that laws are quite useless for bringing about change but this is only the case when laws are left on the shelf or not effectively implemented. The laws above have been monitored by many women's NGOs and they have often complained to the relative state agencies if the latter failed to comply. A recent event attested to this when several NGOs complained to the minister concerned that some policemen had refused to record complaints from domestic violence victims (*Star*, *New Straits Times* (*NST*), 20-29.6.1997). Other laws with a male bias have also come under scrutiny and the NGOs are advocating further sexual equality laws, for example laws pertaining to guardianship and citizenship.

Besides advocacy work, women's NGOs have gone out to the public (e.g. to schools, rural and urban communities) in order to publicize their causes via the media, talks and forums. Here they disseminate ideas on women's rights, and discuss issues of violence, prejudices and entrenched ideas against women; these include blaming women victims for attracting violence through their mode of dressing and careless attitudes, etc.

Therefore, the multiple-prong strategies used by women's NGOs have achieved much to further the position of women and the eradication of some prejudices. But there are more struggles to be carried out before real equality between men and women is attained, and hence a radical improvement in the quality of life for many Malaysian women.

What is the Modern Malaysian Woman?

What constitutes a modern Malaysian woman? What epitomizes a Malaysian woman? Has Malaysian society through its 'melting pot'

evolved a Malaysian identity where one's identification is based on nationality rather than on racial origins?

Unfortunately, the racial polarization has increased (latently) and although there is peaceful co-existence among the races, there has been a heightened sense of belonging to one's race, in other words, a growth in ethnocentrism. Youth, as the future generation, is a good representation of what it means to be Malaysian. One typical example is the university student, who although he or she represents the 'elitist' group, to some extent mirrors a wide section of society. Students from a particular race generally have friends from the same race and few or none at all from the other races. When asked why, the typical answer was that they are more 'comfortable' with their own race. The same goes for selection of flatmates, eating places and the language used. It has become extremely common for the students to speak their vernacular language in front of other races, thus excluding interaction and communication with the 'outsiders'. University students in the 1960s and early 1970s seemed to better racial communications. In view of the difficulties of conceptualizing a typology of Malaysian women, after describing their positions in the public and domestic spheres, perhaps a picture can be drawn from what has been said of them in recent studies.

Let us take a brief look therefore at what some researchers have said about Malaysian women with regard to the modernization of the country. In the past literature focused upon factory girls and on Muslim Malay women (Lim 1978; Jamilah 1988; Ong 1989; Maznah and Wong 1994). In summary, the discussions on factory girls have centred on their adaptation to factory and urban life, their newly acquired freedom from parental control, their future as urban wives and mothers, and their joining the ranks of the proletariat. The discourse on Muslim women was in relation to their mode of dress and appearance and their rationale for adopting such conservative attire while continuing to work in the public sphere. Many have continued to behave rather inappropriately within the Islamic tenets, where they continue to mix and date the opposite sex and to wear leotards for aerobics exercises. Many of the women who have adopted conservative dress gave different rationales for doing so: professional women stressed independent choice but based on ideas of correctness advocated by Islam; while factory girls laid emphasis on social and peer-group pressures, plus male expectations (Maznah

1994:132). Women in the political leadership, in the corporate and higher public sectors, and delegates attending UMNO congresses have adopted a more Malayish headwear called the *selendang*[2] which is quite different from the more arabized headcover. In brief the question of 'acceptability' within the paradigm of Islamic society, gender relations, and Muslim womanhood is of paramount importance. Conformity is perceived as the natural order of conducting one's life in this universe.

To explain the concern and quite considerable preoccupation felt with the outward appearance and behaviour of women since the strong upsurge of Islam in the 1970s, one must turn to concerted action by these forces to reinterpret the role of women and men. Women are encouraged to concentrate seriously on their roles and duties in the domestic sphere and to accept the leadership of their husbands. This interpretation is emphasized to women as their main obligation, coming at the time when more Malay women are going out to work in the waged sector. Along with the emphasis on the specific obligations of a good Muslim woman, attention is paid to their dress. The question of indecent exposure and covering the *aurat* has been widely accepted as including the hair, body, arms and legs. Therefore, all these parts have to be covered up in daily activities, even when engaging in exercises such as sports and swimming. Out of this need to cover oneself, many fashionable designs of clothes and headwear have developed. It does not mean that one is conservative to cover up, but rather that one is a good Muslim woman who can adapt to modernization, a working life and a righteous way of Muslim life. For the Muslim men there has been less debate on decent and appropriate male attire.

Recently, the issue of public decency for women arose, when three young Malay girls were arrested for participating in a beauty contest (*Star*, 2.7.1997). According to the religious authority who made the arrest, in 1995 the Selangor State Government had passed section 31 of the Selangor Syariah Criminal Enactment 1995 to enable the religious authority to act accordingly. The law, which was passed in May 1995 without much public knowledge or consensus, states that

> Any person, contrary to Islamic law, who acts or behaves in an indecent manner in any public place shall be guilty of an offence and shall be on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding RM1,000

or imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or both (*New Straits Times*, 7.7.1997).

Over 2,763 people have been arrested under this law (*NST, ibid.*) and, not surprisingly, the majority of the victims have been women. Statements to this incident from the lawyer of the victims and some public groups were that they (the girls and members of the public in general) were ignorant of such a law and the girls should be excused this time around. There was no question of the violation to one's basic human rights nor why it was necessary for such law, nor that there had been no input from women's groups or NGOs before formulating such laws.

Few people and groups, especially the non-Muslims (including NGOs) dare challenge this action for fear of being construed as anti-Islam. There are both legal and social sanctions which prohibit non-Muslims from voicing any criticism against Islam or Islamic practices and issues in Malaysia. However, a few women's NGOs and individuals in Kuala Lumpur made a 'protest' statement criticizing the arbitrariness of such a law and the humiliation imposed on the victims by such arrests. It is equally difficult for an ordinary Malay to be critical of the religious authority. For a Malay to question the action and rules of the religious authority would be to invite trouble (such as the case of Kassim Ahmad in the early 1990s); it could have negative repercussions, such as ostracism by certain sectors of the Malay society.

According to the dictates of capitalism and consumerist culture, the question of dress and behaviour seems to be of less concern for women from other races, who are able to dress more freely even if they are often still being dictated to – this time by the fashion industry (for example, the emerging micro-mini skirts and shorts, the three-piece suit for executive women, etc.). The latter, more subtle form of coercion is apparently less noticed and debated by society. Consumerism grew alongside our capitalistic development with the process of urbanization, where supermarkets and shopping malls replaced green and open spaces. The growing number of women's magazines, television stations and other related media encourage constant consumption of goods and particularly promote branded goods.

The media's influence on the construction of life within this framework, promotes the ideology of the 'rich and famous' where

local women's magazines display the homes, furniture and spouses of successful businessmen, bureaucrats, politicians, and of women in the business and corporate world (see Mustapha and Manan 1994). Standards of beauty mainly promote upper-class values and Western features such as pert noses, long lashes, full lips and blemish-free skin. The models epitomize slimness, youth, and adorn themselves with priceless jewellery, branded clothes, and designer handbags and shoes.

Local and Hong Kong soaps watched by thousands of Malaysians also portray women in such stereotyped roles as nagging wives, gossiping women and sex objects (Shanti and Wang 1996). The local Malay soaps are usually quite simplistic both in terms of plot and characterization: they generally promote the idea that any problem can be solved by returning to the Islamic religion. The Malay woman who has erred, will find the solution to all her problems by returning to her religion.

There is of course a big difference between what the media portrays and the daily realities of most ordinary women. Most Malaysian women are basically confronted with the need to earn a wage and to be a good wife and mother. As a woman undergoes the three life stages of being single, then married and then growing old, she is expected to conform to expected roles, behaviour and appearance. There is some uniformity in this spectrum, where young women are expected to behave with decorum and propriety. Keeping one's hair long is seen as feminine and beautiful. A fair, blemish-free skin and Caucasian features are highly prized by both sexes and promoted by the advertising houses and media. As the standard of beauty has been determined by the media, as stated earlier, reports by plastic surgeons (*Sunday Mail*, 26.1.1997) confirm that many women are asking for Western-type eyelids and sharper noses, silicone breast implants and liposuction. Married women are seeking laser treatment to eradicate blemishes and the over-forties are turning to facelifts. Because of the lack of state-funded kindergartens and childcare, working women have to balance busy working lives in addition to managing childrearing. Furthermore, after work in the office, factory, etc. women are still expected to do the housework and prepare food. It is rare that husbands do the cooking on alternate days or share equally in any other domestic work.

The care of the sick and aged largely falls to the daughter or daughter-in-law, although this is less practised now as more women

are working and the housing infrastructure is too small to accommodate two families under one roof. This is especially so for the medium- and low-cost flats where there is barely space to accommodate families with more than one child. Many older women continue to babysit their grandchildren; their behaviour and interests are more inclined to religious pursuits, and their sombre attire befits the image of an old person. Asexuality for the elderly is expected where marriage for the over-sixties (especially for women) is not the norm. An event where two elderly couples got married made the headlines recently (*Star*, 20.5.1997). This is out of the ordinary. The need to behave in accordance with one's age is reinforced by the terminology, which categorizes people into different age and status groups by its terms of address: auntie, '*mak chik*', is commonly used to address older women in a respectful manner. (Men are accorded a similar terminology too.) The psychological transition to old age is prepared well in advance. For the older generation, acceptance of the life-cycle is less problematic than for the younger generation (i.e. the postwar boom babies), where the idea of youth, vitality and longevity has gained some ground.

Conclusion

The lack of women's representation in the more formalized institutions of the public sphere is counterbalanced by quite strong input from women in the NGOs. The position of women has improved over the last few decades and gender relations are changing slowly to a better equilibrium between men and women. As women form half the population and half the voters, this means that they are a force to be reckoned with. Future leaders and political parties inevitably have to woo the women's vote by taking up issues of special importance to them, especially when more women are becoming better educated and informed.

The central dynamic for change has come from these women's groups and NGOs, and the institutions of government are now supporting these groups to facilitate such changes. Thus, we now see many joint meetings between female government officials, political party leaders and NGOs on tackling women's issues. Such 'closer' cooperation will tend to benefit women in general, although it may dilute some of the more radical demands of the NGOs and could be

construed as coopting the women's movement. Without a progressive ideological framework, women's NGOs (in common with many other existing NGOs) may eventually become service oriented and professionally run, without any vision of creating a more equal system of wealth and income distribution within a less stratified Malaysian society. Many Malaysian NGOs are basically reformistic and welfarish in nature. The NGOs do not pose any challenge to existing power structures and class relations. For whatever it may be worth, great achievements have been made by the NGOs but still there are many more challenges ahead for them, and for women in general to effect a better balance in gender relations and a less crime-ridden society.

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NOTES

1 The new NGOs include the Women's Crisis Centre, Penang (1985), the Women's Aid Organization (1982), the All Women's Action Movement (1985), the Sabah Women's Action Resource Group (1987), and Sarawak Women for Women Society (1985).

2 There are several exceptions to this such as the De Costa case early this year where she took her case to the industrial court and won (12 January 1997).

3 The *selendang* is a traditional Malay headcover worn by women for attending special occasions such as weddings and funerals. The headgear normally does not cover all the hair on the forehead.