

## Women, Politics and The Media

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### Abstract

Media operate within a social context where social forces and power relations can impinge upon the way issues and events are covered. Put another way, reality is socially constructed in a manner so that things and people are regarded via the media as “normal” and “natural”. Gender stereotypes and negative portrayal of women are a few of the blatant manifestations of media’s normalization and naturalization of social reality. Sexist judgment of women such as their subjugated status within a male-dominated society is symbolically and further reinforced by the omnipresent media. As media scholars persistently argue, gender is indeed a social construction and not a natural fact, an ideological distortion for which the media are to be blamed collectively.

This paper examines how Malaysian magazines reframe discourses to suit the societal construction of gender. This paper contends that women and men are constructed based on the role society believes that they should fit into. It looks at the kind of discourses magazines take on, and whether it perpetuates or downplays the notion on stereotyping, patriarchy, and the Malaysian cultural ideas of the gender roles. The assumed realities and self-image about both genders will be scrutinized through the discourses in the selected Malaysian magazines.

### Introduction

Gender battle in Malaysia is far from over and never a thing of the past although the world generally and Malaysia specifically, have witnessed changes in the roles and status of women. Women have and are doing well in many domains and contributing to the distribution of resources in the social, economic and political landscapes. Malaysian women generally are still experiencing a variety of disadvantages in their social and professional lives. There is still a crucial need to address the structural forms of gender inequality in Malaysia as they influence the life and experiences of women.

After almost two decades since the The World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 which had identified thirteen critical areas, one of which is gender and media/communication and the Malaysian government too had made commitments to draft and implement policies that would improve gender parity in society, there still exists blatant gender inequality in the Malaysian society. This can be clearly seen in the feminization of jobs and civil society, gender discrimination in media profession and stereotypical media portrayal of gender specifically.

Therefore, it is disappointing to see that the one thing that has not changed in the Malaysian media landscape is how women are stereotyped and used to market, sell and consume products. Social perceptions and assumptions of women’s ‘proper’ role in society are still at large and are dominating the media landscape specifically.

### Women’s political presence in Malaysia

Women made their presence felt in Malaysia politics even before the country gained independence as many of them participated in the nationalist and/or anti-colonial movements. Chinese school girls joined left-wing political groups. For example Women’s Federation established 1946 - reportedly linked to the communist network. The presence of Malay women in politics became more obvious after WW2. Kaum Ibu Selangor was one of the 36 Malay Organization which combined to form UMNO (United Malays National Organization) - started as a welfare organization and later became the women’s wing

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of UMNO. It played a major role as fund-raiser, membership-recruiter and vote-mobilizers - roles still carried out by Wanita UMNO.

Indian women were not left behind. A number of them joined to regiment set in Malaysia to fight for the national struggle in India. However when MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) was formed in 1946, none came upfront and until now, their participation is relatively low. Chinese women presence in the WANITA MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) was also low. In contrast, UMNO has always had a very strong women’s presence. Women’s membership in UMNO constitute almost half the party membership. The same goes to PAS - the opposition Islamic party, women make up 50% of the party’s total membership.

### Representation of Women

Far back 1956, Khatijah Sidek - the most vocal leader was expelled from the party for being ahead of her time in advocating for women’s representation in UMNO. This demonstrated the resistance women faced in attempting to increase their descriptive representation. She had “agitated for greater female representation in the decision-making bodies of the party, an independent status for the women’s section, a separate women’s youth section and the increased nomination of women to run the national elections” [1].

Such resistance still exists as indicated by the small proportion of women in the legislatures, the executive arms of the government at both federal and state levels, and in the decision-making level of political parties. The proportion of women elected to the Dewan Rakyat and the State Assemblies or appointed to the Local Councils has been consistently low. After the latest 2013, General Election and

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the formation of the new government, there are 28 male Ministers and only two females while there are 21 male Deputy Ministers and only five females.

### Barriers to Women's Representation in Malaysia

According to Rashila [2], five major obstacles stand in the way of women who wish to participate in politics:

1. Social perception of women's leadership ability
2. Role conflicts
3. Religious constraints
4. Structural constraints especially within political parties
5. Limited financial resources.

In essence, prevailing gender relations in the larger society would certainly be reflected in the political institutions as well. It is blatant that Malaysia has a long way to go in terms of improving the representation of women as long as the structural and cultural barriers within the Malaysian political parties exist, Men's monopolistic hold over the selection committees of women's electoral candidacy must first be broken. Patriarchal notions that deem women as unsuitable for public office must be countered through gender-sensitive training/program. Although women have been contributing extensively to the nation's development and economic growth since Malaysia gained independence 57 years ago, the patriarchal underpinnings of the society apparently is still hindering women's equal treatment.

Such gendered societal structure is extended naturally into other socio-political structures including the media. Since the media ownership in Malaysia is heavily influenced by the political dynamics of the ruling coalition, the gendered characteristics of the coalition are well reflected in the organization of the media. Women are not only disadvantaged through conditional career mobility within the management structure of the media. As a group, their cause for the advancement of their status through the use of media content is also being marginalized. The media is more interested in women as consumers. Women are stereotyped and used to market, sell and consume products. Stereotypical images of women in the media are enhanced by the extended commercialization.

### Media and Gender

According to Lemish D [3] media texts are perceived to be one of the prime cultural sites through which it is possible to study the position of women in society. This is an arena within which our society presents itself publicly, defines our identity for us, establishes the parameters of consensus, and relegates what is perceived as unconventional to the margins. Women are mostly relegated to the private sphere, emotional worlds, sexual worlds and presented mostly in subordination to men. This framing of women according to her was defined by Tuchman [4] as "symbolic annihilation" achieved through processes of condemnation, trivialization, and the absence of women from the media.

Media does not exist in a vacuum and is not an autonomous institution - the end products are the reflection of the social practices in the media production process. Media operate within a social context where social forces and power relations can impinge upon the

way issues and events are covered. Put another way, reality is socially constructed in a manner so that things and people are regarded via the media as "normal" and "natural".

Media dominates our lives - everyday of our lives. With the advanced of social media - Internet, facebook, Tweeter, Blogs - our lives are almost controlled by the media in addition to the current old media - television, film, magazines, advertisements. Media represents everybody and everything. Scholars who study media discovered that most people rely on media to craft their opinions, identities and lives [5].

Meanwhile, according to Wood [6], three themes predominate the media:

1. Women are underrepresented - in news especially.
2. Women and men are portrayed primarily in stereotypical ways that reflect & sustain conventional views of gender. Men are represented as independent, aggressive, in-charge, confident, competent, and powerful. Women as dependent, ornamental object, please men, domesticates & must be sexually desirable & available, subordinate to men, victim and angels.
3. Depictions of relationship between women and men emphasize traditional gender roles and unequal power between women and men.

Wood [6] further asserts that media potentially hamper our understandings of ourselves as women and men in three ways. Firstly, media perpetuate unrealistic ideals of women and men. Secondly, media pathologize the bodies of women and men and especially, prompting us to consider normal physical qualities and functions as abnormal and requiring corrective measures. Thirdly, media contribute significantly to normalizing violence against women, making it possible for men to believe they are entitled to abuse women or force them to engage in sex, and making it possible for women to consider such violation acceptable.

Media content play a hugely significant role in shaping our perceptions of what constitutes 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. An analysis of media content is very crucial due to the media's role as a powerful source of meaning about the social world. However, media content does not equate with social reality as media content only 'represents' or 're-presents' the realities in the real social ,economic and political world. Whose version of realities is often questioned by media scholars. The critical media studies continue to ask questions such as:

1. what does media content tell us about unequal power relationships?
2. what discourses and/or ideologies are employed in order to tell stories about the social world?
3. what aspects do they highlight?
4. what aspects do they ignore?;
5. How do particular forms of media content shape public opinion and public policy?; and
6. How and why do particular forms of media representation about class, gender or ethnicity change over time? [7].

## Researching Gender

Six Malaysian women and men magazines namely Jelita, Wanita, Her World (women) and Glam Lelaki, FHM and Maskulin (men) were selected as my case study. The publications are targeted at women and men aged 20 and above. They are locally published in either Malay or English. They are selected as these magazines can be representative of the genre representing women and men in those age ranges.

The object is to map the overall general overview on what kind of discourses are part of the readers within the context of gender.'

## The Women's Magazines

The three magazines analyzed - Jelita, Wanita, Her World - are generally about how to be a "woman" as prescribed by the norms and culture. They basically promote the ideal woman, the ideal body, the ideal wife, the ideal way of keeping one's husband, the ideal way of raising children and importantly to do all these and yet maintain one's beauty. Through its monthly editorial content, topics and words used, the magazines propagate the lifestyle of a successful married, working, caretaker and an understanding woman in all aspects.

In essence, the three MEN magazines analyzed demonstrated the same discourses which is "stories of masculinity" as suggested by Gauntlett. The core narratives in men's magazines as proposed by Gauntlett are apparent in the magazines:

1. Men like (to look) at women - FHM is mostly about semi-clothed women posed in suggestive manners. GlamLelaki mostly portrayed the high class lifestyle - women and men - and the whole concept of the magazines is about life of the rich and famous of both gender. It portrayed mostly pictures of modern women in impressive and expensive clothing. Maskulin is more to the earth men's magazine and the least of semi-naked women's pictures but with many women's pictures nevertheless.
2. ...but don't know too much about them - the three magazines give out a lot of advice on how to handle relationship and how to be better in bed.
3. Men like cars, gadgets and sport - this is obvious in all three magazines whereby columns on cars, gadgets and sports are specifically catered for men which is not allocated for in the women's magazines. This is a reflection of masculinity and men, as prescribed by the society.
4. Men are fascinated by bravery and danger - an act of heroism is a must in all three magazines. Men, as demonstrated by the three magazines are obsessed with masculine pursuits. The societal idea of being powerful and strong only belongs to the men.
5. Men need help - the three magazines demonstrated their support to helping men in grooming and beauty by highlighting beauty products and health and fitness.

Studies done by Malaysian researchers such as [8-12] established that patriarchy, gender stereotyping, gender oppression and gender inequality continue to be pervasive in the media. And hence, the current gender roles in Malaysia is further perpetuated by the media apart from cultural processes and social interactions on how female and male are defined, positioned and structured.

## Why Gender Matters?

Acceptable gender roles are often translated into policies and practices which will be resulted into inequalities. Perceptions

coloured by culture and tradition exist in the media organizations. Social perceptions and assumptions of women's 'proper' role in society dominate the media landscape.

In essence, the study has demonstrated that all the magazines analyzed propagate women's traditional roles within the society's mindset and blatant sex and sexuality about women. I have argued elsewhere that education is one of the apparatus to inculcate gender-sensitive culture in the society.

The achievement of a truly democratic society requires gender equality to be a mainstream agenda. The education system can help to provide images that reflect and reinforce the pragmatic gender roles instead of perpetuating socially constructed gender roles.

Hence, two crucial mechanisms must first be considered:

1. Promote media literacy on gender discriminations amongst government officials, media practitioners and school goers;
2. Institutionalize gender-sensitivity training for government officials and media practitioners.

This will facilitate consciousness raising that can dispute the existing discriminatory practices. Media as a powerful tool than can help foster changes must be sensitive to women's issues and debunk the myth that has been a part of the society's life. What the media has constructed, media can deconstruct and reconstruct. Media will only be capable to do so if the workforces, being the ones who furnish the society with information, fully understand the basis of human rights. Societal mindsets can only be shifted through education and media can help in changing the public attitude.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interest exists.

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