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Representation of Malaysian Women in Politics

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The Focus of This Paper

This paper examines how the traditional and online media portray the role of women in power, whether ruling or the opposition party who are either politicians or women behind the scenes in the 2008 General Elections. The investigation of the present study is undertaken using the theoretical framework of Framing. According to Tuchman (1978) mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events.

A qualitative analysis using Content Analysis ((Neuendorf, 2000) will be used to look into the issues that are discussed by the women politicians and women behind the scenes that are highlighted by the media as reflected in the news articles through out the campaign period. (24th February – 7th March 2008). A comparative study of the news articles extracted from the traditional media , *The Star* and online media *Malaysiakini* will be analysed.

Introduction

Malaysia recently concluded its 12th General Election in 2008. The ruling coalition, National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) has been in power for the past 50 years, since

independence in 1957. However this election proved to be a ‘political tsunami’ as the party lost its two – third majority in parliament as well as lost its control in five out of the thirteen states in the country to the opposition, People’s Alliance (*Pakatan Rakyat*), something unprecedented in the history of political development in Malaysia.

Women in Malaysia have been involved in politics since pre independence. From the time of independence, Malaysian women have had the right to vote and to hold office. Women though active members of political parties continue to be loyal supporters of political parties. Thus the growth of women politicians and decision makers are still lagging behind in comparison to their male counterparts. In this general elections a total of 222 parliamentary seats and 405 state seats were contested whereby 130 women candidates contested for the parliamentary and state seats, out of which fewer than 50 were successful.

This is still far from the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry’s proposed 30% target of women at decision making positions in the public sector levels in the 9th Malaysia Plan but it is definitely an improvement from the total of 80 women candidates that contested in the 2004 General elections.(Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2008)

Media Coverage of General Elections

Media coverage of the recent 12th General elections has been extensive ranging from mainstream media to online media. The varied representations of the General elections have undoubtedly created certain impressions in the minds of the mass media audience.

This paper examines how the traditional and online media portray the role of women in power, whether ruling or the opposition party who are either politicians or women behind the scenes in the 2008 General Elections.

Online media is popularly held to have influenced the results of this election. While mainstream media has existed since colonial administration, online media is still rather new as it came about in the 1990’s. News articles in the traditional media, such as *The Star* newspaper will be compared alongside and online media *Malaysiakini*, the country’s first commercial online newspaper.

Background: Political and Legal Status of Women

The rights of Malaysian women as citizens to participate in the political and public life of the nation are recognized and guaranteed under the Federal Constitution. Article 8(1) state “all persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law”. To ensure there would be no laws that discriminate women, Article 8(2) has been reviewed and amended by the Parliament in August 2001 to include the word “gender”.

Therefore, Article 8(2) now reads: “except as expressly authorised by this Constitution, there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent, or place of birth and gender in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of any property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment”.

The establishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Development in 2001 marks the culmination of efforts to assign women’s development and issues to a specific ministry. It also signifies a positive move to strengthen the national machinery for women’s progress. (APEC: 2004)

A Slow Upward Trend

The involvement of Malaysian women in power and decision-making positions in politics and the economy has been on a slow upward trend since independence. After independence, the number of female candidates elected to Parliament has increased at a moderate rate. In the 1959 elections, only 3.1 per cent (three candidates out of 104) of the candidates elected to office in the Lower House were female.

This increased to 3.9 per cent in 1986, 7 per cent in 1995 and 10 per cent in 2000. The number of women elected to the various State Assemblies during this period also increased, rising from a mere 2.7 per cent in 1986 to 4.8 per cent and 6 per cent in 1995 and 2000 respectively.

After the 2004 general election, there are three women ministers in the Cabinet out of a total of 33 full cabinet ministers, three women Deputy Ministers out of a total of 38 and six women Parliamentary Secretaries out of a total of 22. In the Lower House (Dewan Rakyat), there are 22 women out of 219 members and 19 out of 57 members of the Upper House (Dewan Negara/Senate) are women. (APEC : 2004).

TABLE 1 : WOMEN CANDIDATES IN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Election Year	1955	1959	1964	1969	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990	1995	1999
Total Parliamentary Seats	52	104	104	144	154	154	154	177	180	192	193
Women MPs	1	3	3	2	5	7	8	7	11	15	20
%	2.00	2.90	2.90	1.38	3.25	4.54	5.19	3.95	6.11	7.80	10.36

Source: Rashila Ramli. 2000. "Political Modernization: Gender Equality in Political Participation?" In Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), Country, Market and Modernization. Bangi: UKM Press, pp. 198-213

Women constitute over 50 percent of Malaysia’s population. (Wan Azizah: 2002). Nevertheless, the presence of women in decision making process is still far from

satisfactory. Currently women still find themselves under-represented in Malaysia's political institutions.

Methodology

The investigation of this study is undertaken using content analysis of the traditional media *The Star* and online media *Malaysiakini*. According to Van Dijk (1988) contextual analysis focuses on the cognitive and social factors, circumstances, limitations and consequences of textual structures, as well as their economic, cultural and historical backgrounds.

As defined by Neuendorf (2002), content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. For this paper a latent coding method is used (also called semantic analysis). Here the underlying implicit meaning in the content will be analysed (Babbie, 2004). The coding system is based on the issues mentioned below to guide the interpretation of the text.

This method is best used for tapping underlying meaning of communication, because people communicate meaning in many implicit ways that depend on content, and not just in specific words (Neuman, 2003).

This paper examines how the traditional and online media portray the role of women in power, whether ruling or the opposition party who are either politicians or women behind the scenes in the 2008 General Elections. So, how does the media frame women in politics? It asks whether women have improved in terms of the quantity of coverage, in relation to Tuchman's (1978) omission concept, and whether the coverage has improved in relation to condemnation and trivialization. Has the representation of women improved as they have increased political participation? Is there any evidence that as women's political power has increased, their media representation has similarly improved?

A qualitative analysis will be used to look into the issues that are discussed by the women politicians and women behind the scenes that are highlighted by the media as reflected in the news articles through out the campaign period. (24th February – 7th March 2008).

Framing theory and gender

Gitlin (1980, p 7) defines frames as 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selections, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourses. Tankard (1991) defined media frame as the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.

Similarly, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) refer to frames as 'interpretative packages' that give meaning to an issue. By virtue of emphasizing some elements of a topic above

others, a frame provides a way to understand an event or issue. According to Cappella & Jamieson, media can be said to frame events and issues in the same way as a photographer frames a photograph, choosing what aspects to highlight or draw attention to, and what parts to leave out (cited in Fountaine 2002).

Weaver (2007) emphasised that framing includes a broader range of cognitive processes such as moral evaluations, causal reasoning, appeals to principles, and recommendation for treatment of problems. Therefore, he claimed that framing is about efforts at making sense of an issue. Hence, framing theory considers how the news media cover events and issues, and in another component of the approach, how individuals make sense of these events and issues, drawing partially (but not exclusively) on media representations.

Framing theory is regarded as especially relevant to the study of media in political life (Reese, 2001). According to de Vreese, newsmakers may employ different frames in their coverage of an issue, scholars agree that this abundance in choice in how to tell and construct stories can be captured in two frames – issue specific and generic frames (cited in de Vreese 2005). Generic frames concentrate on coverage of politics, in particular elections campaigns. (Vreese, 2005).

Gender theorists have also used the approach to explore the framing of women politicians and women's issues. According to Sreberny- Mohammadi & Ross, the approach offers a new, more nuanced way of understanding gendered media representations, which partially supplants the traditional preoccupation with negative news coverage of women (cited in Fountaine 2002).

Data and Analysis

Malaysiakini

Malaysiakini was launched on November 20th, 1999. Its mission is to inform the Malaysian public of the latest and critical issues in an independent and fair manner, carrying news items often neglected or censored by the mainstream media, thereby challenging the views produced by the government-dominated mainstream media. *Malaysiakini* unlike the majority of the print and broadcast media is not owned by any political party, nor does it require annual licensing from the Home Minister.

In line with *Malaysiakini*'s aim, it is quite clear that this online media's main purpose in the 12th General Election is to fill in the gap left by the main stream media as well as to give the underdog candidates coverage which has been neglected by the main stream media, hence an unbiased view for the voters. A majority of the issues voices raised is thus pro-opposition. Access to *Malaysiakini* was offered free for the entire campaign period

On the analysis of the articles reported in the *Malaysiakini*, different styles of framing were portrayed when comparing the Opposition women and Barisan women.

Opposition Women

Malaysiakini frames the Opposition women in two different perspectives

Spirited Leaders

It is apparent from the analyses of the articles in Table 2, that the Opposition women are seen as spirited credible leaders who are capable of challenge. Articles such as “Lembah Pantai: Izzah’s Induction of fire’ mentions how a young girl was tossed into the limelight of history, how her father’s words steered her cause from college girl to region-wide symbol of change. By highlighting that Nurul had no gestation period for her entry into politics and that she was plunged headlong into the fray indicates that she is able to weather any challenge.

In “Anwar confident of daughter’s victory’ projects his daughter as a talented young girl who understands the election process, “Reversal of roles in Titiwangsa” discusses how most voters would imagine that BN would field a ‘worldly’ professional who will be able to pit his secular skills and pragmatism against a PAS’ ‘other-worldly’ cleric who is skillful in inciting scriptures and Islamic tenants, however the fight between Aziz and Lo’ Lo’ suggests an aberration from the usual as the National Front had decided to go ahead with a Syariah candidate.

By implying this *Malaysiakini* attempts to highlight that the National Front has gone back against its usual policy perhaps in anticipation of Lo’Lo’ stronghold and popularity thus fielding a person who is of same stance as her, hence indicating in itself that Lo’Lo was a force to reckon with.

While in ‘Kok raps rival over ‘sexist’ posters’” depicts how the Opposition leaders have to go through the turmoil of sexist charge related problems. It is also depicted that these problems do not come from men only but also from the same gender, something totally unexpected. The article is framed in such way to urge the readers to sympathize with Kok as she is completely vindicated in the campaign style of caricature depicting her as a loose woman with sexist connotations. By highlighting this article the readers are exhorted to see the National Front women leaders as not being sensitive to their own kind. Statements from JAG (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality) further strengthens the stand that National Front demeans women and when made in relation to their work, violate their right to a safe working environment.

In “Seputeh: Lamb no match for the Lion’ elaborates the mighty strength of the Opposition women leader. The continuous usage of affirmative statements frames the mind of the readers that the Opposition women leaders are strong leaders and will not be

disheartened, hence will be able to deliver. *Malaysiakini* by highlighting the strengths of the Opposition women leaders, sets the frame to lead the readers into perceiving these leaders are credible and professional.

Table 2 – Spirited Leaders

24/2	Lembah Pantai: Izzah’s Induction of fire
25/2	Anwar confident of daughter’s victory
25/2	Reversal of roles in Titiwangsa
3/3	Kok raps rival over ‘sexist’ posters
3/3	Seputeh: Lamb no match for the lion

Positive Feedback

In analysing the articles in Table 3, it is evident that positive frames were used to illustrate the Opposition leaders. In “Match- making manifesto woos voters’ the Opposition is framed as a caring leader who wants to provide benefits like match-making and reduced dowry for women in a state like Kelantan where women are the majority, thus implicating that women interest was an important part of their manifesto,

‘Nurul Izzah gets celebrity greeting’ articulates how Nurul Izzah looks like a like a celebrity graciously basking in a red carpet glow and how that all strata of the society were bowled over by her ability and vision for them .With a sub heading entitled ‘Intelligent Arguments’ and stressing that the young onlookers fawned over the winsome candidate, and wanting to touch the glamorous aura about her it was clear that *Malaysiakini* sets to conjure a positive frame of the Opposition women leader who is intellectually smart, “Lo’Lo’ woos Kg Pandan Indian Settlement’ express how the Indians in the area are fed up with the empty promises of government and BN officials to resolve their housing woes and now are pinning their hopes on the Opposition women leader by becoming part of her Kampung Pandan PAS supporters’ club. Thus the articles by zooming on their popularity attempt to set a conclusive frame in the mind of the readers.

Table 3 – Positive Feedback

26/2	Match- making manifesto woos voters
5/3	Nurul Izzah gets celebrity greeting
2/3	Lo’Lo’ woos Kg Pandan Indian Settlement

Critical/Negative of Barisan Women

In line with *Malaysiakini*'s stand of giving the underdogs pertinent representation, minimal articles were written to portray the Opposition in a negative manner, thus most of the articles were anti – National Front. (Table 4)

In 'Divorce Umno, Zuraida tells Malay voters' urges voters to divorce Umno as there is nothing to hope for in these new Umno Malay leaders, they should be brought down from power, because they are robbers, snatchers and plunderers, "Husband, wife? More like cats and dogs', *Malaysiakini* implies that the Indians should divorce the MIC as they have done nothing concrete for the Indians.

"Woman activists manhandled by MIC workers' expresses how unruly the MIC party workers were towards the JAG activists who were apolitical and were there to show concern for gender equality among those chosen to contest in this general election as well as to call for the removal of sexist members of parliament.

'Chew Mei Fun, which planet are you on?' reveals her lack of knowledge of what is going on in the country, in particular the New Economic Policy, "Lembah Pantai : Mud Slinging in the rain Shahrizat' stresses how Shahrizat, who had earlier claimed she would not indulge in personal attacks in her campaign, seemed to against her word, thus not being trustworthy.

By framing articles that imply the National Front as very obstinate and egoistic *Malaysiakini* attempts to coerce readers into not swaying for the National Front's attics. Thus, *Malaysiakini* uses a host of cues of frames to pressure the readers not to trust the National Front

Table 4 – Critical/Negative towards Barisan National

26/2	Divorce Umno, Zuraida tells Malay voters
27/2	'Husband, wife'? More like cats and dogs
2/3	Woman activists manhandled by MIC workers
4/3	Chew Mei Fun, which planet are you on?
7/3	Lembah Pantai : Mud Slinging in the rain.

The Star

The Star gives covered a spectrum of women issues either as frontline leaders, behind the scenes support not just for the male leaders but as strong foundation for the family, hence a very holistic unit. The articles were also framed to portray that the women were the back bone of the family unit, thus creating an image of powerful women, the leader and the family preserver.

National Front women leaders are competent, dynamic and duty bound

Evidence can be drawn that the National Front women leaders wish to be seen as competent, dynamic and duty bound. (Table 5) The National Front women leaders are advocated as leaders that are sincere and respectful of their fellow contestants.

Articles such as ‘Azalina: BN knows women are capable’ indicate that National Front has confidence in its women leaders. ‘BN women who make history’ shows that National Front is ready for women power, hence women leaders have got the mandate to compete’.

“Ng: Good government like a good wife’ mentions that women have been likened to be good wives, with a good wife you need not seek another one, instead you hold steadfast and continue to support her through thick and thin. This sexist statement that stereotypes women as home makers could have been a double edged sword that made the voters shun away from National Front.

“Chew Mei Fun not one to shy away from hard work’ exhorts the readers to believe that Chew’s advocacy for women stems from a personal conviction and her contribution to the women cause has been immense,

“Personal touch works wonders for Noraini’ mentions meeting face-to-face is the most effective way to address the citizens concerns, Don’t badmouth opponents Puteri Umno candidates told’ where candidates are reminded that this is a fair election and told to be mindful of what they say.

‘Shahrizat lends polls rival a helping hand’ mentions how Shahrizat is so helpful that she is even willing to assist her own contender

Thus the framing by *The Star* attempts to create salience in the eyes of the readers that they should vote for the National Front women leaders as these leaders are a set of unswerving leaders who will be able to fulfill the needs of the community.

Table 5 – National Front women leaders competent, dynamic and duty bond

Dates	Headlines
25/2	Don’t badmouth opponents, Puteri Umno candidates told
25/2	Shahrizat lends polls rival a helping hand
1/3	Azalina: BN knows women are capable
1/3	BN women who make history
1/3	Ng: Good government like a good wife
3/3	Chew Mei Fun not one to shy away from hard work
5/3	Personal touch works wonders for Noraini

National Front women are caring and family orientated

From the analyses of the articles in *The Star*, it can be apparent that the National Front women wish to be seen as having strong family values. (Table 6) This can be seen in “Wives join battle’ illustrate how women are the force behind the men candidates. ‘A family affair’ implies how the family and relatives unite as a unit and stand steadfast for their family member who is a candidate in the elections. “Campaigning as a family” whereby a family gets together to volunteer support for their candidate. ‘Saripah stands by her hubby,’ where the wife is a pillar of strength for the husband. ‘Mum on campaign trail makes time for her young children’ elaborates while the elections were important the National Front women leaders are one who never neglect their home base. ‘Jeanne finds campaign an eye-opener’ expresses how the Prime Minister’s wife finds the campaign an eye opener and how she is supportive and proud of her husband. ‘Awang Adek: Mum would have been proud’ illustrates the candidate’s love for his mother and how the role of the mother is well appreciated by a male candidates, ‘Murukasvary’s husband and three sons a real boon’ indicates how the women candidates get utmost support from their family members.

The Barisan Nasional leaders have been framed in *The Star* as leaders who have a strong sense of family values and traditional cultural values. They have clear priorities, are resilient and committed to their job portfolio.

The Star by choosing to highlight these issues, attempts to use the power of the media in such a way to exert pressure by convincing the readers that the National Front women leaders were caring and thus would put the interest of their constituencies first if elected.

Table 6 : National Front women are caring and family orientated

Dates	Headlines
28/2	Wives join in the battle
29/2	A family affair
29/2	Campaigning as a family
29/2	Saripah stands by her hubby
4/3	Mum on campaign trail makes time for her young children
6/3	Jeanne finds campaign an eye-opener

6/3	Awang Adek: Mum would have been proud
7/3	Murukasvary's husband and three sons a real boon

Opposition Women

Minimal coverage is given to the Opposition women. In “More accusations being hurled involving Po Kuan’ elaborates on her lack of responsibility while “Grandma set to campaign” mention that at 89-year-old Maimun Yusuf made headlines as possibly the country’s oldest ever election candidate.(Table 7)

Table 7: Opposition women

26/2	More accusations being hurled involving Po Kuan
26/2	Grandma set to campaign

The Star by highlighting the Opposition weakness attempts to influence the readers mindset that the Opposition women leaders were not a bunch of committed leaders.

Discussion

This paper attempts to gauge the effectiveness of two newspapers, i.e. one the traditional print media, *The Star* and the other on-line media, *Malaysiakini*. It is obvious that both the media seek to set the frame for their respective readers. *The Star* being indirectly owned by the National Front attempts to set the frame in getting its readers to believe that it is vital to vote for the National Front women leaders. On the other hand *Malaysiakini* in achieving its aim to fill in the gap left by the mainstream media reports the Opposition women leaders favourably thus framing its readers to give the Opposition parties a chance. The effectiveness of on- line media is clear as can be seen from the inroads made by the opposition parties in the 12th General Elections. The findings indicate:

Women, a subset of the elections

It is very obvious for any reader to see that neither *The Star* nor *Malaysiakini* were focusing on women issues as their main agenda in this election.

While *The Star* appeared to have given more coverage on the women’s participation, it still stands firmly lagging behind in comparison to the male political leaders representation.

The Star gave the impression that the women’s role ‘were more behind the scenes’ or the back bone and failed to mention the more significant contributions of the women.

Malaysiakini, while focusing on women Opposition leaders’ strength and contribution, nevertheless had minimal articles featured in comparison with its articles on male leaders.

However the articles had more depth with substantial issues being discussed thus creating an impact which then created a good impression of the women leaders.

Hence in comparison while the *The Star* had more articles, it was *Malaysiakini* that shone as its articles were more focused on the women leaders itself, their strength, capability and performance.

Nevertheless it can be concluded that in both the media, the women's role offers continued support for the omission aspect of "symbolic annihilation" thus indicating that on the surface while more women issues are discussed, main critical issues on women developmentalism is clearly omitted. Thus the notion of the 'glass ceiling' being a barrier indeed exist in the Malaysian media representation of women.

Leader, Supporter or Follower?

It is evident that *The Star* covered the women in an array of roles, from the loving mother, the ever faithful and supportive wife, the back bone of the political party, the role model, the strong leader and the indispensable icon. *The Star* portrays women as having continued the trend of providing solid support for male leaders, and have engaged themselves primarily in raising support for the parties. Women members are depicted to turn out in full force during election campaigns, and carry out routine tasks related to daily campaigning and facilitating voter participation during the election process. While women provide strong support to their parties, the majority of women seem to have remained in their role as supporters of male leaders, and have, with important exceptions, retained traditional gender roles within contemporary political life.

While *Malaysiakini* only focused on the women as leaders who championed their cause. Though the coverage of women was lesser in comparison to *The Star*, however the issues discussed are more substantial and significant. Women leaders were seen to be projected as reliable and steadfast, hence worthy to be elected as a representative.

Malaysiakini portrayed the coalition of the opposition women as a group holding a set of comprehensive principles, held fast to the name of 'rakyat' or 'the people.' Hence, a far better portrayal than *The Star* in terms of the issues discussed.

On the other hand, evidence can be drawn that *The Star* highlighted marginal issues such as the National Front's women candidates competency and commitment, how the candidates and the ruling government were doing a good job, how well they were liked and thus to ensure this the public needed to cast their votes for the National Front.

Malaysiakini also differed from *The Star* in its coverage by drawing attention to the role of the women as leaders only. Thus, it is visible that *Malaysiakini* attempted to sway the readers view. With the accessibility of the on-line media, the public who craved for a

different style of reporting took advantage of the services provided by *Malaysiakini* and patronized it well.

Perceptions of women leaders

It is apparent that there is a certain pattern in the portrayal of the women leaders by the media, be it National Front or the Opposition. This is in terms of how the media highlights women leaders, whereby they are pitted against each other, 'the strong' against 'the weak' as seen in Yong Dai Ying versus Elizabeth Wong, 'the young' against 'the old' as seen in Nurul Izzah versus Sharizat and the service only MP's in Chew Mei Fun versus Teresa Kok.

Thus, with both *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* highlighting these issues, it illustrates that women leaders were cannibalizing themselves. Hence, even further symbolic annihilation. This tends to cloud and belittle the issues that the women leaders represent which are then not featured and highlighted.

Stereotyping of gender issues

Does the media reflect social reality? In a patriarchal society like Malaysia, the role of men are considered superior in comparison to women. This is consistent with Tuchman's (1978) suggestion that changes in society would eventually result in more equitable media coverage although a period of "cultural lag" needs to be endured. (Fountain, 2002). Taking the cue from here it is apparent that the media in Malaysia reflect this in their reporting using gendered news frames. With men dominating most positions in the electorate system, women are seen as the back standers or the 'women behind the successful man'. (Dalton, 2008)

The stereotyping of women is well projected with images of compassion and sensitivity. The media by drawing attention to one's imagined femininity by utilizing gendered identities such as a mother or housewife may also lead to certain expectations of the public. Women are seen carrying out routine tasks related to daily campaigning and providing support for their male leaders. The use of traditional frames which are built around the dominance of men, with women portrayed as anything less than political outsiders. Hence the media reporting follows these sentiments as this is prominently seen in the reporting of the *The Star* paper. The womanhood is exemplified in motherhood/parental, wife and family and feminine themes were clearly exploited and used as a criterion for leadership portrayal to garner support from the readers. It is evident a preoccupation with the maternal and familial status of women politicians is consistent with the concepts of trivialization and condemnation when equivalent criteria are not applied, or used to judge, the male colleagues representation.

Conclusion

Voters see the political landscapes largely through the eyes of news media.(Kahn: 1994). In races for the parliamentary or state seats where direct contact with the politicians are rare, voters receive most of the information about the political parties and political leaders from the newspapers. As such voters do not experience politics directly. Instead the perception of political world is framed largely by the news media's representations. Thus as a result of selectivity, the news media frame rather than mirror the political landscape. This is especially potent during the general elections where voters almost exclusively rely on the media for political information. Voters' dependency on the media for political information may be problematic for women running office.

Furthermore, the news media seem more responsive to the messages sent by male candidates. The society's cultural baggage where men's views in politics are seen to carry more weight than women's adds to this problem. Thus, the media's agenda more closely resembles the agenda issued by male candidates. This is not something new as in United Kingdom , despite the apparently large numbers of stories about Margaret Thatcher, the standardized measure revealed that grey boring, John Major was the subject of more stories than the Iron Lady (Lawrence). This systematic difference in press treatment of male and female candidates may hinder women as they strive for political office.

Media not only informs, it also influences. The media is a very powerful agent and women leaders be it the National Front or Opposition should make it their business to monitor negative media images of women and influence the media to take up a courageous stand, differentiating constructive criticism from willful attacks on the powers that be. Since media is a most effective agent of change, it can either be used for social development or to reinforce prejudicial stereotypes.

It is clear that women's representation in the Malaysian media is changing to reflect their increased political status and participation as elected representatives, but the old adage that more does not mean better applies. Women form at least half the population and are infact politically more conscious and motivated. This is substantiated by the fact that more Malaysian women take the trouble to register as voters and more women than men turn out to cast their ballot.(Tan, 1999) While the visibility of women has increased, structural, systematic gendering of women in politics still takes place in the media. This gendering often takes place with the involvement of women themselves, but this involvement anticipates and feeds sexist media representation of women in politics.

Hence, Tuchman's classic work on symbolic annihilation does occur in the Malaysian media whereby there are instances of omission and trivialization despite greater political gains by women. (Fountaine, 2002) Journalism educators need to re-theorise gender in the news for the 21st century less in terms of visibility/invisibility and more in terms of the quality of media representation. The onus falls back on the industry to ensure journalists are trained in and maintain high standards generally, which will have positive implications for diversity. Gallagher (2001) discusses that not only women are ignored and stereotyped, but also that there is a tendency for reporters to practice "lazy

journalism” in, for example, reverting to stereotypes to explain actions. Instead, one of the problems is that in the media, as in every sector, the accepted way of doing things is usually also the easiest. The challenge for the women leaders is to convince media professionals that the easiest way is not necessarily the best – in terms of the quality of their output, or its appeal to the audience (Gallagher, 2001).

Women leaders on the other hand must endeavor for a more open, just, and equitable society. Politics in Malaysia has been painted as a man’s world , ‘old boy’s network’, one in which women will not last, let alone make an impact. Women leaders need to be serious and passionate over their causes and take up a central position as pressure groups and lobbyists. Their participation has to go beyond numbers and move towards a qualitative transformation of women shaping national decision making process. This is critical as statistics by the Inter Parliamentary Union shows Malaysia’s rank has dropped from the 72nd place (out of 181) to 104th (out of 188) countries in representation of women in Lower and Upper House of Parliament. The Asean average is 14.6%; Malaysia is 10.5%. Asean Countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines all rank higher than Malaysia despite their lower economic standing.(Abdullah, 2008)

Thus, women must overcome the ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon,’ which serves as an invisible barrier and obstacles to women’s progress. As part of this effort, it is necessary to establish an alternative agenda that includes enabling women to maximize their potential in contributing to their personal well-being and to the development of their society. It is necessary to create an alternative channels that goes beyond tokenism that does not just use women as an accessory of the political machinery to bring in the votes during elections. Women’s rights to participatory democracy need to be redefined. While women’s positions in politics are one aspect contributing to development, it is important to remember the role women play in other sectors of society. Malaysia’s experience has shown that any discussion on the role of women in politics cannot be confined to only representation in formal institutions. Women in Malaysia thus need to move the wheels for a 'Political Awakening' which is in keeping with the changes taking place all over the world.

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