CULTIVATING GENDER SENSITIVE CULTURE IN THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA INDUSTRY: A CRITIQUE AND AN ALTERNATIVE

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Introduction

Media's treatment on gender issues has always been a vital concern of many, especially strong advocates of human rights principles, who view detrimental treatment of women as one of the major impediments in achieving gender equality. In Malaysia, ever since the 1970's, academics and interest groups have been writing and researching about the disadvantaged or marginalized position of women. Today, the interests of scholars and activists in the issues have remarkably intensified. Ironically, the media organizations fail to take note or choose to disregard the ongoing intense discussions that are persistently taking place.

As media operates within a certain complex system, it is thus vital to understand the political economy of the media as the underlying basis of the total framework. However, it is not the main aim of this paper to critically analyze the political economy of the Malaysian media; this paper is merely using the framework as the basis in understanding the relationship within the social structures and economic powers that resulted in certain end products. Political economy is essentially the studies of production – it deals with issues of structures. The image of structure indicates that there are underlying patterns of order that govern the content. These structures are prominent as determinants of capitalism and class inequalities (Mosco,1996). As political economy questions the existing social system especially its inequalities while gender, media and power are intertwined, this paper moves from this perspective.

The focus of this paper is on the gender division of labor in the Malaysian media landscape in order to locate the nature of the gender sensitive culture within a larger framework. It is my contention in this paper that developing gender-sensitive culture in the Malaysian media industry is very important. I further contend that the deconstruction of traditional values and systems of inequality that maintain patriarchal social structures can best be deliberately reconstructed through educating the masses. This can be done through sustainable education and sensitization processes. In writing this paper, I have based my propositions on a measure of empirical studies. Data on media workforce from a few organizations were collected. Interviews were also carried out with two managerial figures of the dailies, The News Straits Times (NST) and Berita Harian (BH). Although the interviews involved only two newspapers, they may represent the Malaysian media. The newspapers are mainstream and have high circulations. They each represent a most widely spoken and read language in the country and they have survived the industry for 161 years for NST and 49 years for BH.

Ownership and Control : The Controlled Malaysian Media

To have a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape media content, the effect of ownership concentration need to be deliberated. Deregulation and privatization of the media in the 1980s have resulted in the proliferation of commercial media in Malaysia. Malaysian media are basically either state-owned or are owned by groups aligned to the ruling coalition. Media Prima Berhad (Media Prima) is currently the largest listed media conglomerate and owns four television networks. It also owns the biggest newspaper publishing company, The New Straits Times Press (NSTP). The former press secretary to the Prime Minister is the Executive Director of Media Prima and he is also a board director of another Malaysia's media conglomerate, Utusan Malaysia Group (UM). The ruling party's Malay component, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has part ownerships of both the Media Prima and UM (Zaharom Nain and Wang Lay Kim, 2004).

Meanwhile, the Chinese component of the ruling party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) through its business wing has a majority share in the Star Publications. And to top the icing on the cake, The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) that is the Indian component of the ruling party, holds a huge portion of the Tamil Press. As for the state owned television station, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) that operates two channels, RTM1 and RTM2, it is owned and maintained for the public by the government and is usually aimed at educational, informational and cultural programs.

Women in Malaysia: The Marginalized Majority

Malaysia has progressed tremendously in terms of socio-economic development and Malaysian women in general too have made remarkable progress in many spheres of life. About 48.9 percent or 12.3 million of the total population in 2003 were women, with 7.7 million in the working bracket of 15-64 years. The total number of women in the labor force has increased from 37.2 percent in 1970 to 42.2 percent in 1980 and in 2002, it rose further to about 46.0 percent (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003).

The policies, strategies and programs for the progression of women are included in the socio-economic development plans of the country. Beginning with the declaration of the Women's Decade (1975-85) by the United Nations, the Malaysian government has made a pledge to intensify the participation of women in the development of the country. The set up of National Advisory Council on Women and Development (NACIWID), Women's Affairs Secretariat (HAWA), National Policy on Women, Women's Affairs Division and Ministry of Women and Family Development, may be testimonial of the government's effort to include the women population in its socio-economic development plans. However, many may argue (Wang Lay Kim, 2002,2005; Folej, 2003; Azman Azwan Azmawati and Juliana Abd Wahab, 2005) that such steps are merely paying lip-service to the call to increase participation of women in the development agenda.

The amendment of Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution in 2001 to include the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of "gender" is a manifestation of such lip-service treatment of state obligation. This is because despite the constitutional position of the prohibition, it does not translate into operational laws. In spite of the

persistent calls by the civil society for legislation of a bill on sexual harassment, for example, the government is still reluctant to promote such act as a legal wrong. Article 14 of the Federal Constitution is expressly biased against women in the issue of nationality of children of citizens and non-citizens. (Azman Azwan Azmawati and Juliana Abd Wahab, 2005).

The latest manifestation of a state action that has the effects of marginalizing women is the recently passed amendment to the Islamic Family Law Act. In December 2005, the Malaysian Parliament passed the Islamic Family Law (FT) (Amendment) Bill 2005 which contained provisions give men even more power in issues relating to marriage and divorce especially regarding matrimonial property, unilateral power to divorce and contracting polygamous marriages.

The political system reflects a male dominant society. Women are seen to have complementary rather than equal roles. In political parties, women constitute the majority members, well over 50 percent of voters but women's penetration in higher posts within the various parties is dismally small (Wang Lay Kim, 2005). The political culture in Malaysia does not help to promote women to decision making positions although the Malaysian government reiterates its commitment to see at least 30 percent participation of women in policy making. For example, in 2004 there were only 36 female members, compared to 531 male members, of the State Legislative Assemblies. Statistics show that increase of female members over the period of 10 (1990 to 1999) years can be deemed insignificant. In 2004, 16 Parliamentary Secretaries were male and six were female. Three out of 38 Deputy Ministers were female. Similarly, only three out of 33 Cabinet Ministers were female. (Off The Edge, 2005)

Women in the Malaysian Media Workforce

Malaysian women in general participate well in the local media industries. On the other hand, their participation at the decision-making levels is minimal. The number of women employed in the media industries in the 1970s rarely exceeded 30 percent of the total work force. The situation has not changed significantly in the 80s and 90s. In 1986, men held all the top five positions at the local news agency, *Bernama*. Only two out of ten senior news editors were female while all 15 senior journalists were men (Mohd. Hamdan Adnan, 1987). Women comprised only 15 percent in of the total Malaysian media professional work force in 1989. Although the number of women journalists rose significantly in the 1990's, a 1996 research revealed that only between 20 to 25 percent women held positions at the decision-making level. During that period, only one succeeded in becoming Chief Editor of a mainstream newspaper. Another organization appointed one female Assistant Editor. In the electronic media, *Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM)* employed 12 women executives. Its then sole competitor, TV3, has 20 women executives at its helm. (Rahmah, undated).

The pattern continues. In 2005, *RTM* has a total of 89 permanent work force in its editorial department. Although the total female outnumbered male by 38, only 22 females were holding decision-making positions (such as editor, assistant news editor, producers) (Azman Azwan Azmawati and Juliana Abdul Wahab, 2005). The same scenario can be seen in the print media organizations. *Berita Harian* and its sister newspaper, *Harian Metro* demonstrate the same marginalization of women. In March 2006, only 13 out of 139 executives at the decision making levels are women. 91

women and 122 men constitute the total journalists of the organization. In the case of *Bernama,* 92 women and 101 men make up its entire editorial staff. However, only 14 women, compared to 27 men, hold decision-making posts.

In essence, decision-making power matters and who decides, matters most. In the Malaysian media landscape, it is apparent that gender underpinnings of decision-makers can be said to reflect the end media products. The media content is influenced by what the society perceives to be the commonly accepted ways of viewing and defining the reality of women. Studies conducted by Wang Lay Kim (1994); Wang Lay Kim and Mustafa Kamal Anuar (1996) and Wang Lay Kim (2000) affirmed that women in locally produced dramas are depicted as weak or dependent on male characters. Women are not any different in the news. Mustafa Kamal Anuar and Wang Lay Kim (1991, 1994, 1996) and Wang Lay Kim (2000) asserted that women in locally produced television news are almost invisible, secondary and subordinate. They are dependent on the male characters, reflecting prevailing dynamics of spousal relations. Studies done by Azman Azwan Azmawati and Juliana Abdul Wahab (2005), Kiranjit Kaur (2004) and Wang Lay Kim (1994, 2000) demonstrated the reinforcement of stereotypical and traditional women's roles in locally produced women programs.

Prevailing Attitudes about Women in Media Organisation
The failure to propagate and disseminate more important media content about women derives from the patriarchal nature of the Malaysian political and economic system that perpetuates stereotypical portrayal of women. Despite the increase in women's participation in the media industry, it is hardly noted, as discussed earlier, that women end up in decision-making positions or policy designs.

Although women have been contributing significantly to the nation's development and economic growth since Malaysia gained independence 48 years ago, the patriarchal underpinnings of the society 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.

In an interview (March 2005), the Assistant Group Editor of the *Berita Harian* revealed the "unwillingness" of the management to appoint women to decision-making positions. He cited a few setbacks that women may cause to the smooth running of an organization, most importantly, women's commitment to the family. In his view, once a woman has a romantic partner in her life, her focus and priority begins to change. She will not be able to give her undivided attention and full commitment to the career as she has to fit into her "female" role. He referred to a group of women who joined the company at about the same time he had. Over the years, he felt that not even a quarter of these colleagues could be considered as putting

their jobs first. Although this is a view of one man in the organization, the fact that he sits quite high in the hierarchy means that his opinions may well form a determining policy of the organization.

An interview was also conducted with *The New Straits Times* (NST) Women's Editor (March 2005), who is male. The fact that *NST* appointed a man as the women's section editor speaks loudly about their views on women. According to him, there is so much more that can and should be done about improving women's position. He presented that apart from instilling a sense of confidence, encouragement and inspiration through uplifting articles, the women section does not forget to include "fashion and beauty" to purportedly instill confidence in women. This is a conscious stereotyping of women by associating them with beauty products. It fits into the society perceptions of what a woman should be to a man.

The women's movement has criticized the local mainstream media for stereotyping women's images, commodifying women's bodies, appallingly portraying violence against women in the media, through advertisements, soap operas, dramas and news. For example, in a spate of rape and murder cases reported in the local media, the media tended to sensationalize reports by providing large photographs of the victims, exposing in detail the private life of the victims. This may reflect the inadequate understanding of the media professionals about the underlying gender problems in such reporting (Azman Azwan Azmawati, 2004; Wang Lay Kim, 2004).

Renounce Stereotypes and Surpass Inherited Perspectives
I have argued elsewhere (Azman Azwan Azmawati, 2005) that education is one of the apparatus to inculcate gender sensitive culture in the society. Through knowing and understanding, society will become conscious of the implications of every action taken. Gender equality must not be the concern of women alone as it has impacts on the society as a whole. 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. Awareness-raising at the very early age of a human being will help to bring about changes on perspectives about gender roles.

Subsequently, media being a vital institution that can mobilize change must perform its function appropriately. As a force of change, media can help to bring about an understanding on the construction and representation of gender and raise gender sensitivity amongst media audiences and practitioners. The Malaysian media must help to break through the conceptual, perceptual barriers on gender by reflecting non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women. It must include gender issues in its training curriculum. The current level of awareness on gender issues amongst the local media practitioners is very low and therefore some perspective changes must be made before the industry can afford to see new climate taking shape.

In essence, two crucial mechanisms must be considered first:
- Promote media literacy on gender discriminations amongst government officials, media practitioners and school goers; and
- Institutionalize gender-sensitivity training for government officials and media practitioners.

These will facilitate consciousness raising that can dispute the existing discriminatory practices.

By way of a conclusion, let me reinstate and reiterate that the role of the media as an influential tool to foster gender equality is long way past due. Media as a powerful tool that can help to change the social system 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 that if the workforces, being the ones who furnish the society with information, fully understand the basis of human rights – regardless gender, age, color and religion – we all as humans have the same rights. Knowing and asserting our rights will be the most important step to demystify all myths on gender and education will help us to accomplish that. Societal mindsets can only be shifted through education and media can help in changing the public attitude.

"The product of the media – what appears, what does not appear, the way it is slanted, will reflect the interest of the buyers and sellers, the institutions and the power systems that are around them. If that wouldn't happen, it would be kind of a miracle"

-Noam Chomsky, 1997-

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