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## **Gender stereotypes in Malaysian Parliament: A content analysis**

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**Abstract.** This study examines the use of sexist language and gender stereotypes in the parliamentary debates in the Malaysian parliament. Given the prevalence of the majority male Members of Parliament (MPs)

as well as their dominance in the Parliament, this study discusses and analyses patterns of gender stereotyping

and the social implications arising from their discourse.

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, Malaysian Parliament

### **1. Introduction**

Parliament is a public domain where only elected MPs are privileged to engage in parliamentary discourse. Such parliamentary privileges allow them to be free from being called to account for their

parliamentary words or actions either in civil or criminal courts. In Malaysia, the law of defamation, official

secrets, obscenity, blasphemy, and of all other criminal offences does not apply to parliamentary proceedings

(Shaq Faruqi, 2007).

This study shows that in the 2004-2008 term, out of 219 MPs, 186 (85%) were male. There were only 33

female MPs (15%), of which two were appointed as ministers. David (2006) in discussing face-threatening

speech acts highlighted the lack of civility and politeness of some MPs in their debates. MPs established

their in-group relationship (we/us) with other MPs who represent the same political party or coalition, and

who adopt the same ideology and practice, whilst some MPs use social distancing markers to show rivalry

towards one another.

### **2. Theoretical Preliminaries**

Gender is a social arrangement. Perceptions of gender, particularly the idea and patterns of relationships

between male and female have been firmly built into the social order. This is deeply embedded in every

aspect of society – in our institutions, in public spaces, in private domain, in advertisements, in art and

clothing. The gender order supports and is supported by structures of convention, ideology, emotion and

desire which are so interwoven that it is often difficult to separate gender from other aspects of life (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 34).

Sexist language is a product of cultural norms and traditional ideas of how masculinity and femininity are perceived in the society. Sexist language has social implications because it “creates, constitutes, promotes, or exploits an unfair or irrelevant distinction between the sexes” (Vetterling-Bruggin, 1981: 3).

Sexist language is a form of derogatory code that violates the rights of women because it constantly perpetuates ideas of what and who women should be. Such language is often used to manifest sexist bias through

Ngeow, Yeok Meng, PhD. Tel.: 603-7967-5430; fax: 603-7967-5427. *E-mail address:* ymngew@yahoo.com embodying explicit or implicit gender stereotypes. Wodak (1989) argues that linguists should study

“language behavior in natural speech situation of social relevance,” while attempting to expose “inequality and injustice.”

Following Fairclough, discourse has its effect on society through repeated use, through sequences of use, through the laying down of a history of use. In time, the practices become subjugated and become social

norms, or common senses. Holmes (2006) argues that even in the workplace, women’s contributions have been undermined, underestimated and undervalued because many institutions still practise preference

towards the males. She notes:

... in many workplace contexts, men’s discourse styles have been institutionalised as ways of speaking

with authority... as a result, women are less likely to be perceived as potential leaders and those who do

move into leadership positions face a double bind ‘regarding professionalism and femininity’... (p. 35).

The Parliament is indeed a high profile workplace for female MPs, where their performance is judged

by the national leaders, the journalists, as well as the public. This study offers a better understanding of this

important social phenomenon, and reflects clearer interpretations of the MPs’ thinking and actions. It is

hoped that the findings of this study will help to highlight such phenomenon with better and more informed

decisions concerning alternative “solutions” to problems or issues inherent in the phenomenon.

### **3. Methodology**

Content analysis focuses on the existence and message of texts in a certain discourse, and interprets them

within a socio-cultural context. The main data elicitation source of this study is the Hansard (recorded

transcriptions of parliamentary proceedings) in the Parliament official website

<http://www.parliment.gov.my/hansard.php> from 2004 to 2008. Content analysis is used to identify instances

of gender stereotyping and sexist language use; and to derive a clearer understanding of when and why gender stereotyping exists in the form of sexist language use in Malaysian parliament. Using content analysis, sexist remarks are coded and analysed to examine what is the choice of words and phrases that are deemed stereotypical sexism to the women, with some relevance by male and female MPs in defence of women. This study applies textual analyses of a discourse, by examining the explicit choice of words of the speakers, which strongly reflects the implicit aspect of the speech; the thoughts, views, values and even agenda hidden beyond the words. Secondly, it also looks into how the text is articulated, who the audience is, who the speaker is, the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, and who else is listening (Johnstone, 2002).

#### **4. Important Findings**

The content analysis of verbal speech acts found in Hansard shows that there were many instances and utterances containing sexist language and derogatory references that belittle female MPs and women's role.

This study has identified the emergence of three categories of frequent episodes involving gender stereotypes and/or sexist language. Although the list is arguably inexhaustible, the following gender stereotypes are discussed in this paper. They are:

1. beautiful women are sexual objects for lusting;
2. female divorcees are sexually promiscuous;
3. menstruation is demonised.

##### **4.1 Stereotype 1: Beautiful women are sexual objects for lusting**

These stereotypes focus on the physical traits and behaviour of women and reflect some of the common perceptions held by some MPs (mostly men) towards women in general. On debating the dressing of the stewardesses of two local airlines, MP for Tangga Batu (male, Malay Muslim, Islamic opposition party) contends that the choice of clothes and physical appearance (makeup, perfume, hair style etc.) of airstewardesses who are seductively dressed can result in such women become entertaining to bored men. As a result, men may commit sexual crimes by unleashing their repressed sexual libidos on innocent female victims (Hansard, April 13, 2005).

Women are judged by their appearance, and to some MPs, beautiful and attractive women are sexual objects that turn men on. Women are objectified when they become items of desires, and MP for Tangga Batu argues that men visit airports to look at beautiful air stewardesses. MP for Sri Gading (male, Malay

Muslim, ruling coalition) echoes the sentiment, adding that beautiful women have a tendency to turn men on by stimulating them. Note that the sexist statement was not directed at any political party, but at women in the airlines industry.

Both male MPs clearly exhibit sexist attitudes towards women who are not conservative in their clothing, and accuse them of being indelicate ('kurang sopan'). They opined that non-conservative dressing seduces men, and that it was not right to seduce men in this way. Hence, female Muslim MPs should dress conservatively. This view was echoed with the thumping of tables as a sign of applause and agreement with the speaker. It is possible that they see non-conservative dressing as a form of immorality, which must be curbed. Both opposition and government MPs agree with such sexist sentiments.

#### **4.2 Stereotype 2: Female divorcees are sexually promiscuous**

Women who are divorced are seen as sexually promiscuous because they are free to have sex with anyone they like, argued MP for Rantau Panjang (male, Malay Muslim, Islamic opposition party, Abdul Fatah Harun). According to him a female divorcee shall not gain much sympathy as compared to a widow.

This is probably due to the negative stigma that female divorcees have been 'used' before by their exhusbands, and so they bear the negative connotations of being 'unclean' or 'tainted.' Divorcees are also seen to be less moral because they deserted their husbands as compared to women who have lost their husbands due to death. Such statements can be deeply offending to divorcees who may have divorced under certain circumstances, and suffered much. The sexist remark offended many MPs, including those from the opposition, and the MP for Bukit Mertajam (who is an opposition MP) chided the MP for Rantau Panjang for making such remarks (Hansard, April 13, 2005).

#### **4.3 Stereotype 3: Menstruation is demonised**

Menstruation is a natural biological faced by women but even this has been used by two male, Malay Muslim MPs, to ridicule MP for Batu Gajah (female, Chinese non-Muslim, Democratic Action Party, secular opposition party), who raised the issue of leakage in the Parliament due to poor workmanship. She was then accused of having monthly leaks, However, as the hall was noisy and chaotic, the female MP did not pick up the attack until a day later, when she read of this comment. It was reported that MP for Kinabatangan (male, Malay Muslim, ruling coalition) was heard asking, "Where is the leakage (in this Parliament building)? MP

for Batu Gajah also leaks every month.” MP for Jasin intensified the insult by saying that the opposition female MP ‘leaks’ every month. Although both male MPs did not mention ‘menstruation’ or ‘PMS,’ the word ‘leakage’ (‘bocor’) in Malay clearly has the same connotation. Unlike the previous incidents, the chauvinist MPs failed to escape or get away with such a derogatory remark about women. The sexist attack indicates the lack of sensitivity to the natural biological function of women. It should also be noted that the attack took place during a rowdy debate (i.e. shouting and interruptions), with lots of offensive accusations, such as ‘stupid’ being hurled at each other (Hansard, May 9, 2007).

## **5. Discussion**

The utterances of gender stereotyping, sexist discrimination and to a certain extent, sexual harassment show that gender inequality indeed exists as a phenomenon in the Malaysian political scene. The relatively frequent occurrences of sexist language use in this particular context support the fact that Malaysian political scene is ‘dominated’ by a patriarch and male-dominated government. This in turns demonstrates the Malaysian government's overall stance towards gender equality (or inequality) concerning women's roles and contribution to society and country.

The above findings suggest that women MPs suffer from various forms of verbal abuse and harassment in the House of Representatives. The laws of defamation, official secrets, obscenity, blasphemy, and of all other criminal offences do not apply to parliamentary proceedings. As a result, MPs are not liable to prosecution with regard speech in parliamentary debates, and hence there is either low or no accountability issue for their speech. This is perhaps why some MPs are not afraid of repercussions of depicting gender stereotypes and sexist language.

When MPs use sexist language to insult, deride, tease, warn, threaten and even sabotage members of the other parties, the sexist remarks are usually stereotypical perceptions of women, in terms of their behaviour and physical traits. Findings show that the audience's general reactions to sexist comments are often negative, thus resulting in heated debate and argument. Occasionally, MPs who make sexist statements do receive positive feedback from other MPs in the form of laughter, thumping of tables, applause and cheers, indicating support and endorsement for the use of sexist language. Another phenomenon that seems pervasive in the discourse of sexism of the MPs is the defence of sexism. MPs who use sexist language,

when confronted, defended their right to use such terms arguing that their utterance was uttered in 'humour' and was not a manifestation of male dominance. Judging from the government's stance pertaining to action taken against MPs who either deliberately or unintentionally made a sexist comment, there is very little repercussion or negative consequence for this indiscretion. Often, the MP would be 'advised' to retract his comment but no action would be taken by the House against those who refuse to issue a retraction or apology. Though there is no legal repercussion, sexist MPs do face social repercussions. For instance, MPs who made sexist comments were regarded with disfavour and eventually voted out in subsequent elections. Following each publicized comment, women's and human rights bodies, Internet chatrooms and mass media would ask for immediate retractions and apologies from the MPs concerned. The risk of uttering sexist language within the four walls of Parliament is minimal due to parliamentary privileges enjoyed by the MPs. However, there is a price to pay for those who refuse to retract their utterances. In the case of the 'leakage' incident, pickets and demonstrations took place outside the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development calling for the punishment of the two male MPs. It was only then that the two MPs started to apologise, and that too with reservations. To pacify the enraged masses, a meeting between Shahrizat and the two MPs concerned saw the duo tendering an apology if "women were offended" but both defended their words used in Dewan Rakyat as necessary to defend the government during debates. They also made no personal apology to the MP for Batu Gajah (Kaur, May 24, 2007). The move became a political black-eye to the government group as many saw injustice being meted on the MP for Batu Gajah. JJ Ray (2008) attributed the loss of Shahrizat in the 2008 General Election as a serious consequence for choosing "to display her political dexterity and take the diplomatic route instead of chastising fellow MPs who openly and shamelessly deride women". It was the last straw for one non-governmental body, called the Joint Action Group (JAG) for Gender Equality, comprising the All Women's Action Society, Pusat Jana Daya (Empower), Sisters in Islam (SIS), Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) and Women's Centre for Change, Penang. They openly campaigned against voting in favour of sexist MPs in the recent 2008 Malaysian General Election. JAG held a press conference in Sungai Siput as a symbol of challenge because the MP for Sungai Siput

himself had once made a sexist remark in Parliament. On the day of the press conference, the JAG members distributed leaflets highlighting several sexist and discriminatory comments uttered by elected representatives, from both the ruling and the opposition parties, in Parliament and in the Penang State Legislature since 2000. These moves were acts of resistance and zero-tolerance of groups towards sexism and undoubtedly, this became one of the many reasons as to why the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, in 2008 lost many seats. With the exception of MP for Kinabatangan, who has been appointed to be the President of Backbenchers in the Parliament, other MPs who were found using sexist language - MPs for Jasin, Sungai Siput and Sri Gading - lost their seats. Another MP who was dropped as candidate for parliamentary seat was MP for Rantau Panjang.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study shows that the use of gender stereotypes articulated in the form of sexist language during parliamentary sittings in Malaysia. Using sexist language and defending the code can have a detrimental effect on one's political career as people may perceive the use of it as disrespectful to women. Political leaders must be seen to be fair and just in both their words and their deeds. In the 2008 General Elections, sexist language was regarded an issue that possibly caused a few sexist male candidates to lose their seats. However, it should be noted that this paper does not argue that sexist language is a prevailing and constant trait. On the contrary, sexism in the Malaysian Parliament is still considered sporadic and not too common in most parliamentary sittings.

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