Women's Political Participation in Sarawak: Methodology, Fieldwork and Findings

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ABSTRACT

This article critically evaluates an agenda for political participation research aimed at providing empirical answers to questions derived from the women in Sarawak. Among other issues, this paper explores the gender constructs that impede women's access to the higher political sphere. Indeed, such socially constructed realities often diminish the possibility for women involvement in the process of decision making. Of particular emphasis on this paper, is the facilitating factor that propels women's entry into political parties. Some of these issues are compromised or became obstacles in women's opportunity in political life. The empirical questions are drawn together into an integrated agenda for future studies in gender and political participation in Sarawak.

Keywords: *gender, politics, participation, Sarawak, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

An essential principle lay down by the United Nations' Human Right Charter on International standards, clearly states that men and women have an equal right to participate fully in all aspects of the political process; in practice, however, it is often harder for women to exercise this right (United Nations, n.d). The progress towards the achieving the 30% target advocated by the United Nations remained slow and uneven throughout the world. It is even more absurd given that half of the electorates in most countries of the world are women. Satirically, member states of the United Nations have continued to preach universal gender equality but pragmatically maintain patriarchal dominance and gender inequality; hence, women are continually underrepresented in the parliament and especially in the executive body of the government.

Democratically, 30% is underrepresentation given that women constitute almost 50% of the world's population yet the figure seems over demanding tasking. Although, the number of women in the workforce has increased dramatically (for example in Malaysia, women made up 3.95 million in the workforce), yet they remain underrepresented in the political sphere. Even though, it is obvious that when women are involved in politics, they bring different perspectives, views and create creditable and transparent political agendas (this is an apparent illustration of political scenarios in German, Australia, and even in Sierra Leone) yet, their numbers have continued to dwindle rather than increase. Most female politicians champion issues not only on women but also on family and communities earning them a nationalistic status. As the backbone of the family, women are directly involved in the societal formation and reformation, making it apparent necessity for them to be part of the executive body of government. As member of the decision-making body of the state, women would be very pragmatic on policies that address family and community needs. Indeed, gender inequalities either in socio-economic or political spheres always deter a holistic development.

As the World Bank correctly noted; "societies with high levels gender inequality experience higher levels of poverty, slower economic growth, weak systems of government, and a lower standard of living (World Bank, 2003)". The World Bank further accentuates the issue on gender inequality report published in 2005. According to the report, it is important to ensure equal opportunities across population groups as an intrinsic aspect of

development and also and an instrument to achieve the poverty reduction and growth (World Bank, 2007). In the light of this, the Sarawak Chief Minister (head of the Sarawak state government) in many of his public informative address, acknowledged the important role women play in politics especially in relation to Sarawak's *Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu* (PBB). Nonetheless, acknowledgment and addressing the core of the matter are two different issues.

Accordingly, PBB target was to ensure that women make up 20% of its elected representatives in the state assembly and its Sarawak parliament by 2020 (The Borneo Post, 2007). However, these figures (20%) fall short of 30% women representative stipulated by United Nations. It also contradicts The Beijing Platform for Action that called on governments to establish targets and implement measures to substantially increase the number of women in power and decision making positions as targeted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO). Fifteen years on and little progress has been made in attaining this target. Instead, the figure has continued to decrease, from 30% to 20%.

Even after 47 years (since 1963) of independence under Malaysia, the domination is recognized as those who structured the political system of Sarawak by having 92.0% of men and 8.5% of women in the State Legislative Assembly Members;[1] whereas, in the Malaysian Parliament, Sarawak has 31 elected representatives, with 93.5% encompassed men and 9.6% consisted of women (Malaysian Parliament website, n.d.). With merely 8.5% of the women in the State Legislative Assembly and 9.6% of the women in the Sarawak Parliament in 2009, it is a gross disparity between female to male. From all logical dimension, 8.5% against 92.0% and 9.6% alongside 93.5% echoes absolute patriarchal imperious.

Evidently, women are always visible at political rallies (that is the grass root) but they are seldom heard of. They are in the forefront of most political activities, welcoming important politicians, preparation of political events but are hardly welcomed. They are rarely included at the top-level

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[1] Currently, the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly has 71 elected representatives comprises seven different political parties and 1 Independent representative. The seats are divided between (1) PBB (National Front or Barisan Nasional / BN) 35 seats, (2) SUPP (BN) 11 seats, (3) SPDP (BN) 8 seats, (4) PRS (BN) 8 seats, (5) Democratic Action Party (DAP or opposition party of the People's Coalition or *Pakatan Rakyat* / PR) 6 seats, (6) PKR (PR) 1 seat, (7) SNAP 1 seat (8) Independent 1 seat (The Borneo Post, August 7, 2010).

decision-making chamber nor the ever all important closed-door meetings and discussions of the political parties. Paradoxically, women at the grass root are at the heart of social mobilization and movement that set the path for Malaysia independence in 1946 (the first political participation among Sarawak women was during this year). Unfortunately, 64 years (since 1946) and long after independence women are still lagging behind, and the policies makers are bent on ensuring they are merely noticed (as ushers) but not heard of nor partake in the policy making of the state or nation.

With such double-standard, this study intends to explore the fundamental flow of women's political participation specifically in Sarawak and Malaysia in general. Indeed, it is impossible to ignore the Malaysian general view on women's political participation. This study therefore, aims to examine factors that deter women's political participation in Sarawak. In the course of defining political participation, it is imperative to be accessible with the general dynamics of political participation. They include those that occur within political parties, which could focus on the formulation of public policy, the voting trends, boycotting, and contacting representatives etc. Conventionally, political participation to some scholars simply means "those activities of citizens that attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities or the policies of government (Conway, Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978).

Activity that has been the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly, by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or indirectly, by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (Burns, Schlozman & Verba, 2001). More specifically, political participation may be viewed as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics (Milbrath and Goel, 1977). This definition is more holistic than many others, as it includes not only active roles that people pursue in order to influence political outcomes but also ceremonial and support activities. This understanding is roles apart from Almond and Powel (1975) view that, "political participation is the involvement of the members of the society in the decision making process of the system".

The current understanding of political participation by the United Nations, non-government organizations (NGOs) and women's movements are more concern with women's representative in legislative and advancing women's rights and interests especially in formulating socio-economic policies. For example, the Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes the

goal of equal participation by women and men in political decision-making. Increasing women's representation in political office is now a widely held development goal. In fact, it is an indicator for tracking progress towards the Millennium Development Goal 3: promote gender equality and empower women (United Nations, 2006).[2] Further, in the Beijing Declaration, Governments from various countries affirmed their commitment to promote and protect rights of women through the full implementation of all human rights instruments.

This declaration was further advocated and advanced by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 2006). Indeed, the World Plan of Action drawn and adopted during the World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 had proposed a ten-year period in a wide range of areas including political participation, education, health and employment (Karl, 1995). Thus, as noted by Karl in the General Assembly of the United Nations approved the plan and declared 1976 – 1985 the United Nations Decade for Women, with the special sub-themes of Equality, Development and Peace (Karl, 1995). Conversely, taking Sarawak or Malaysia case for that matter, ten years has long passed but the women's issue on political matters in particular has remain more of a mirage than a foreseeable reality.

The fact remains that political participation entails that the people (especially women) are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. People may, in some cases, have complete and direct control over these processes; in other cases, the control may be partial or indirect. The important thing is that people have constant access to decision-making and power. Participation in this sense is an essential element of humans' development. Thus, as asserted by Schiffman (2009: Carol Pateman, 1988), feminist political theorists such as Carol Pateman, have pointed out, "that excluding half the population from full political participation falls short of democracy, which should prompt more scholars to reconsider the predominant classifications and analyses of democratic regimes".

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[2] A report was prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). It focuses on the state and progress of statistics. Based on the countries report to the international statistical system, it analyzes their capacity to produce statistics on gender issues, and highlights progress made in reporting those statistics over the past three decades (United Nations, 2006:iii).

What is more, it is logical to stress that political space belongs to all citizens; politics is everyone business and affects the lives each of us even though differently[3]...(Karl, 1995). Accordingly, Karl stressed that if women's participation in the politics and decision making of their countries is a measure of democracy, then all countries still have a long way to achieve true democracy. Furthermore, stressing the importance of women in politics, Mary Beard (Dancz, 1987)[4] argued that "history is incomplete if it does not include women as historical and political participants. While Duverger (Dancz, 1987)[5] stressed the need to study the nature and scope of female political participation on a multinational level.

Over the past decades political scholars have produced an abundant writings on gender and political participation (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004; Conway, Steuernagel and Ahern, 2005; and Paxton, Kunovich and Hughes, 2007), most of these intellectuals noted that women's political participation varies dramatically within and between countries. In fact, most of these scholars echoed similar view; that "gender and politics" is never just about women but it is about the ways in which relations between women and men shape public power (Enloe 2001).

Accordingly, Paxton, Kunovich and Hughes (2007) maintained, "the literature on gender in politics is very broad", (that is, addressing gender inequality in political acts such as voting, campaigning, and leading, as well as gender differences in political knowledge, socialization and attitudes, and women's place in political theory), but this understanding lacked a holistic explanation of gender and political participation. Hence, in this study, women in politics is not merely on 'voting and campaign' per se but this research focuses on holistic women's political participation, but most importantly, examining factors or hindrances that prevent women from running for and holding high level political offices and post. The study will evaluate gender differences in political spheres, and the demand for women,

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[3] The last three words are mine.

[4] Dancz cited Mary R. Beard. 1946. *Woman as Force in History*. New York: Collier Books. Page: Preface and Maurice Duverger. 1955. *The Participation of Women in Political Life*. UNESCO. Page: 104.

[5] Dancz cited Mary R. Beard. 1946. *Woman as Force in History*. New York: Collier Books. Page: Preface and Maurice Duverger. 1955. *The Participation of Women in Political Life*. UNESCO. Page: 104.

as these concepts help inform our understanding of women's egalitarian political participation.

Unfortunately, political participation in Sarawak at the decision-making level (or the highest level of political hierarchy is incontestably reserved for men groomed from youth wing) is still very much limited to the framework that has been decided by the top leadership. Subsequently, the women's political participation in Sarawak is still very much stuck with the past despite political rhetoric, promises, and make-belief speeches addressed by the premier and the state premiership. Data from the field suggests, moving beyond women's leadership (see below analysis) is impossible as long as the party leaders do not authorize such advancement. The question therefore; how could these women advance women's and family's interest and how is it possible for these women to work for women's interest? Evidently, women in Malaysia and Sarawak in particular are wholly involved in politics; however, owing to patriarchal domination and exploitation women are only visible and limited at the periphery of political sphere of the state: that is as a mere *foot soldiers* of political parties. These are the issues that I would like to find out. Hence, this research considers political participation entails anything to do with political activities which include the women's involvement in various political parties, their contributions and their position in decision-making bodies. This study will not merely examine women political activities in Sarawak politics but focuses on their inability to rise and be part of the high level of decision-making organ or body of the state. This is because the big question remains; why are women every where but absolutely lacking in the one place they are needed most? This is in view of the overwhelming statistics that women represent 50% of human population, the backbone of family and communal structures, and influential figures behind most successful humans.

POLITICAL PARTICIAPTION OF WOMEN IN SARAWAK – AN OVERVIEW

Evidently, this study is an effort to empirically explain the limiting factors that are barriers to women's placing in the power structures and decision making positions in Sarawak. In this regards, in order to carry out this analysis, this paper aims to critically analyse the roles and place of the Women's Wing (WW) in political parties in Malaysia in general and

Sarawak, in particular. Therefore, the understanding of the role(s) of WW is very crucial towards identifying factors that work against women's political participation in Sarawak. In fact, given the profoundly strong male domination amid the patriarchal culture of all Asian societies and Sarawak the social order fastidiously it is important to enquire whether such categorisation within a political party(ies) is a beautification of dominant so-called *men's* world as recognised by my area of study.

Much of the existing research has different explanations as offered by political scientists as to why women have a lower rate of participation as public officials than men (Conway, 2001). These explanations include several different theoretical approaches – legal/insitutional, sociological, psychological, rational choice and political process. One aspect of sociological theory as highlighted by Conway, emphasizes (1) cultural and role constraints (the patriarchal culture with its social norms and role expectation); and (2) male conspiracy (men seek to preserve their power positions by imposing restraints barring women from access to positions of influence). Therefore, the investigation of the present study is undertaking the explanations based on these two constraints. That is, the cultural and role constraints and male conspiracy.

Nevertheless, it is significant to note that equal opportunity of women is indicated in the high rate of success in winning electoral seats. Such example is evident in the recent 10th Sarawak State Election. Democratic Action Party (DAP)'s woman incumbent for Pending was Violet Yong. Violet's popularity remains a status quo when she successfully garnered 14,375 votes, which was almost 3,223, increased of votes (or a majority of 7,595 from 4,372) from her previous win in 2006. Next is Sharifah Hasidah with increased majority votes of 2,943. Sharifah Hasidah obtained 5,431 majority votes compared to 2,488 majority votes in the previous election. Fatimah received and won 4,990 majority votes. She previously won the seat uncontested in 2006. Simoi obtained 2,506 majority votes, which is more than the 1,870 votes she obtained in 2006, despite the fact that she was re-nominated to the last hour. Rosey, on the other hand, acquired an increased of 1,874 majority votes. It is an increase of 642 votes compared to her 2006 votes.

However, in these circumstances, their victory does not warrant any guarantee for executive appointment position within their respective parties. Essentially, an indication that elected position in the executive, parliament or the state assembly is based on the consensus or mandate of the general

populate. However, it is worth mentioning here that despite all the winnings, female representation in the executive is extremely low. As of late, only two women has been appointed to the ministerial position which is always related to matters pertaining to women and family. The ministerial position refers to a woman as a full minister as the other woman as an assistant minister.

On that note, the recent cabinet reshuffle in Sarawak in 2011 saw 29 assembly members (elected representatives), appointed as Ministers and Assistant Ministers. There is a newly-created Ministry of Welfare, Women and Family Development, three assembly members elevated as Senior Ministers and seven assembly members appointed as Assistant Ministers. The new Ministry is headed by a female minister, Fatimah Abdullah and she is assisted by two Assistant Ministers, Rosey Yunus (female) and Robert Lawson Chuat (male). Ironically, it is interesting to note that the three assembly members promoted as Senior Ministers are men. None are women. Whilst the seven assembly members appointed as Assistant Ministers comprising one female and six male assembly members. Therefore, there are 29 assembly members (Ministers and Assistant Ministers positions) in Sarawak but there are only two female assembly members. Therefore, having a small number of women in the cabinet, does that convey an impression that women are kept out in ways in which men are not?

It is important to point here that most of the respondents in this study appeared to have vague understanding on creation of Women's Wing. As a result, in order to clearly establish in this work actual factor(s) that gave rise to the institution of Women's Wing, there is need to look at both the primary and secondary data.

METHODOLOGY

The process of data collection took approximately six months. The fieldwork started on 1ˢᵗ of August 2009 until the end of January 2010. Prior to this process, various issues were carefully rationalised. These include the kind of data to be collected and what methods are suitable for my study. During the research design, I was confronted with identifying the nature and types of population and sampling for this study. For example, on the surface, there are more men and fewer women in politics but a holistic definition of political participation presents it differently. Therefore, I had to take into account what I was looking for: that is what are the major lags that hinder women

from reaching the pinnacle of political structure in Sarawak? Answers to such question will be well addressed by women that have tested power and knew the essences of survival in Sarawak political environment. Although, I interviewed woman at the grass-root but there was emphasis on landing bigger fish or female political heavy weight in the state.

Consequently, I employed qualitative method. This is in view of the fact, that most gender studies favour qualitative methods. Besides, it affords the researcher the luxury to probe deeper and harness rich and credible data. What is more, I could not overlook the affluent data that face to face interviewing of my respondents will provide. This is in addition to the priceless data I would gather through observation and in some instance participant observation. By using qualitative method, it was possible to obtain a real insight, and uncover valuable issues that enhance my understanding of "the real story" that hinders women from reaching the high level of the political structure in Sarawak. Both men and women respondents were interviewed. Some respondents did not say much but the little they said, coupled with their reaction expanded my data horizons. For instance, certain questions were simply answered in a very few words: "You know how it is in Malaysia" (see the analysis of that phrase below). Male respondent added more dimension to the entire richness of the data.

These men pointed out, that low educational background is one of the main factors that hinder women's opportunity to be promoted or accepted as election candidate or even to sit at the upper echelon of political parties or state executive. Their response in many instance exhibit a common characteristic behaviour of male chauvinist. Ironically, education as a major drawback for women politicians does not hold much argument in today Malaysia. Although, such argument could be upheld prior to independents however, the number of women population at tertiary (both as professionals and scholars) and other similar institutions across Malaysia and Sarawak in particular has debunk such over due assumption. There is no doubt education could be a barrier and could be overcome, but it all depends on the political environment and the interest of those who hold and control power. Essentially, it is the role of the political parties to provide a conducive environment for potential female politicians to thrive not simply discard such women to women's wing. As proven by one (and one of the few female ministers) of the late women ministers who had low educational background but was very intuitive in her policies. Even with her low education, she was accredited with setting up of cooperatives bodies to create awareness among

the women to be financial stable, financial savings and setting up of small businesses for women in rural areas.

Data from the field equally indicate that a short response to questions is not limited to male but even female politicians as well. Often when faced with sensitive issues, the female respondents appeared reserved and reacted very cautious before giving out their responses. A sign that shows that politics is still surrounded in shroud and secrecy. But at the same time a tribute to these women's survival strategies. But the fact remains, most of these female politicians are frustrated with the system and often appeared hopeless. Indeed, those short responses hold the keys towards unveiling the real issues behind women's lopsided political participation.

Kuching and Sibu in Sarawak were chosen as the study areas. These areas were chosen because they represent a wider mix of ethnic, cultural, religious, social and political backgrounds of the multi-cultural society of which Sarawak is known for. More essentially, these areas have significant substance in the central issue of this study. For example, women from these areas are historically accredited for been the first to publically participate in politics. They also made history when women in Sarawak openly opposed the cession of Sarawak to the British Colony.

Kuching as the capital of Sarawak is the heart beat of Sarawak. It is the centre of government. Moreover, many of respondents originated from Kuching. In addition, majority of Sarawak political parties' headquarters are located in Kuching. In fact, Kuching is home to about 28.07% or 688,500 of the total population of Sarawak. There are about 36% of Malays living in Kuching, whilst Chinese is 39%, Bidayuh 12.6%, Iban 9.3%, Melanau 0.7%, and others is 1.3% (Yearbook Statistics of Sarawak, 2007). Kuching is an interesting city with a mixture of its local dwellers and migrations of Sarawakians from other divisions who are mostly educated. More importantly Kuching as an urban area, have different ethnic groups coming from all over Sarawak, bringing with them their various backgrounds. Therefore, when the people migrated to Kuching, they also transfer their votes to Kuching. However, using Kuching alone will not provide a substantial data, hence the choice for a second research area.

Sibu is another developing city undergoing urbanization. Sibu is a meeting place for people coming from other remote areas such as Kapit, Kanowit and Selangau. People from those regions use Sibu as another area for political and economic activities. Other areas annex to Sibu, include Lanang (which has two state assembly aeras of Bukit Assek and Dudong),

Bawang Assan, Pelawan and Nangka are also multi-cultural with mixed voters of the Chinese, Iban and Malay/Melanau. More specifically, Sibu have a lot of mixed ethnic groupings. Sibu inhabitants include 210,716 Iban (representing about 57% of the total population), Chinese (25.2%), Malays/Melanaus (17%) and others (1.4%) (Malaysia Statistic Department).[6] Sibu is also properly represented with different ethnic groups but more significantly it is the people's acceptance and openness on political issues that is apparent. Consequently, based on the Parliamentary elections in 2008 and Sibu parliamentary by-election in 2010, the number of vote's caste were very impressive and closely contested. For instance, in P211 Lanang, a 57% winning votes was obtained by SUPP[7] whilst DAP gained 45% votes. In P212 Sibu, the winning votes were achieved by SUPP of 54% and 44% attained by DAP and a merely 2.3% obtain by the Independent candidate. In the most recent Sibu parliamentary by-election (P212 Sibu) held in May 2010, the winning votes were obtained by DAP 50% and SUPP obtained 49% whilst an Independent collected 0.61% (Utusan Borneo, Utusan Sarawak, Eastern Times, The Borneo Post, 2010).

Using Kuching and Sibu as the study areas, evidently witnessed a lot of movements in and out where the entire political mechanism are fully represented either through ethnicity, economic and political activities.

As a researcher, I am obliged to adhere to my research ethics to avoid being biased. I alienate myself from of any political party or interest. The entire process of data collection and afterwards analysis is purely academic and a fulfilment for doctoral degree. I am also not associated nor do I belong to any political parties. Essentially, utmost in my mind as I conduct the interviews or collecting of data, is the issue of confidentiality of those I interviewed and the form of information gathered from my respondents. In the course of data collection, some sensitive questions were asked, some respondent avoided them, other answered to their ability and few requested that their voice not to be recorded. As a researcher, I am indebted to finding facts but I am equally bond to uphold respondents' integrity, confidentiality and respect. I have vowed to respect those promises. Yet, the information would used in such a way that individuals would be implicated in any form or means.

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[6] These figures are cited from the report by the Information Department Office during the Sibu by-election held in May 2010. http://media.penerangan.gov.my/pusatmediaprk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1581&Itemid=104&lang=ms

[7] SUPP stands for Sarawak United People's Party and DAP stands for Democratic Action Party.

As for my respondents, especially in determining my respondents, it was difficult to use random sampling because there are a number of political parties that have yet to properly registered names of their members. In fact there was no online database of all the members' names that I could retrieved directly from respective political parties. Some of the members had moved or relocated. Therefore, snowball sampling was employed to get more respondents. This sampling technique was useful and much easier to work with as contacts were established through social networks.

In addition, the chances of meeting the women are sometimes accidental through friends and colleagues. Thus, the option was to use snowball sampling because no formal arrangement was needed. Furthermore, depending on the resources and time available, the respondents could be interview there and then. More so, snowball sampling is useful to increase the number of respondents. On top of that, this technique is good for locating people of a specific population if they are difficult to locate. Using this approach, a few potential respondents were contacted. More specifically, this type of sampling enables me to identify people with particular knowledge who could contribute as part of the consultative process.

FINDINGS

There are three major findings presented in this paper, namely, (1) the you know how it is syndrome, (2) the women's wing and (3) the political structure versus the society. However, it evolved in particular the Women's Wing of few political parties in Sarawak.

The You Know How It Is Syndrome

Based on the respondents' comments, it is imperative and interesting to note that some gave short but captivating meaning of women's participation in politics. For these women, though they are 'Given' the platform to be active in politics or assume certain roles within the political parties, but the real term of partnership in politics remained rhetoric and illusive. The concept of *"You Know How It Is Syndrome"* is a sign of hopelessness and defeat; a form of patriarchal domineering society. In essence, women are schooled to obey, follow and ask no question. In a simplified connotation; this is how things are done here. This expression by most of my respondents

(both male and female politicians), clearly shows that it is difficult to change the traditional gender roles established since the entrenchment of patriarchal imperious. Ironically, about 85% of my female research respondents had to go through hardships to join, participate, and stay in Sarawak politics.

In reality or the acceptable political norms in Sarawak (Malaysia in general) in the years has been to have one or two women recruited by the political parties to stand as election candidate(s) and subsequently elected into the political positions either in the government or in the political parties. As a condition, these women maybe asked or required to step down when a favourable male candidate is ascertain. For instance Anwar Ibrahim and his wife; (previously *Parti Pakatan Rakyat* was headed by Wan Azizah in March 2008 after winning the 12th General Election but gave up her seat to her husband in July 2008) and Sharifah Mordiah Tuanku Fauzi. Sharifah Mordiah did not contest in 1983 Sarawak state election, despite being the assemblywomen for the Sebandi seat from 1979 to 1981. Interviews in Sarawak revealed few important points.

Firstly, Fauzi was asked to vacant her constituency seat because all other assemblymen refused to give in to the demands of the State Executive leadership. Therefore, a woman's seat was chosen over men's. Secondly, it is evident that male's dominance existed in Sarawak politics that demonstrate the supremacy of man over woman may be due to political leadership. It is therefore, observed that male supremacy and female subordination is evident during the early 1980s because the female incumbent did not protest against the decision of the political party leadership, of whom she highly dependent on.

According to some of my respondents, all the incumbents (male and female – she was the only female then) were solicited if anyone would vacant their seats. None vacant their seats except for Sharifah Mordiah who was also seek out to give up her seat paving the way for Taib to return to Sarawak politics (Sarawak Tribune, 1987). This model of gender political participation has been internalised and accepted because patriarchal dominance always seek to perpetually exploit and dominate women. Therefore, it was not always easy for women to be accepted by most political parties and by conservative male members of the parties. Further, the decision either to accept or to turn down the recruitment of these election candidates is not made by a group of men or women but only by a leader who determines everything.

The comments from the above indicated the prevalence of the 'masculine model' of political life. In fact the respondents' comments show that men always dominate the political arena because it is not easy for the women to be accepted among men. In many instances, men formulate the rules of the political game, hence, men determine the decision even though all the political parties are gender blind. Yet, in a democratic sphere women and men, hypothetically have equal role in the decision-making process. Conversely, according to most of my female respondents (86%) and male respondents (14.3%), political decision is often a male prerogative or the prerogative of a single powerful male in the political parties. For according to some of my respondents (P1F2, P1F3, P1F6 and P2F3) it is obvious that the influence of patriarchies' is still strong. Based on her experience, P2F3 was used to be consulted for decisions within her upper echelon. Even though she was the only woman sitting in the committee, she was always involved in decision making process. However, she observes today that the current political hierarchy is very much different. She added that the present political hierarchy's decisions are made by a single leader without consulting the other members in the upper echelon.

Since the central or supreme or the high committee of the political parties are male-dominated, only a few women are appointed if not elected to be in the committee. The patriarchy system is so entrench within Sarawak politics that decisions are made not by a few senior members of the party like before but by the leader of the party. Therefore it was not easy for women to be elected or appointed as a leader unless the leader said so. According to my respondents (P1F1, P1F2 and P1F6), if a female candidate refuses to abide by the final decision of the leader or senior male members, she might be demoted or regulated to less prestigious position in the party.

On the other hand, the passive action amongst the women especially during the contestation of seats (in the women's wing section) which is held every three years remained uncontested. It seems that most female politicians are complacent to agree that there should not be any contest in some of the high political positions within the party as a result of 'you know how it is syndrome'. In fact as a number of respondents stated, "the grass roots will decide whether the existing leadership will stay or not. Normally, the members usually preferred the seats to be uncontested because we are happy with the current leadership politics." Ironically, in the words of another respondent, "to be honest, there are two issues here, the first is, there is no future in the party and secondly, the older generations' refused to

relinquish their power". Based on the first issue, P1M3 further commented that there are party members who were against each other. Due to their in-house fighting, there are other members in the party, who are potential leaders and at the same time they want to be active and involved in the political parties. However, due to the in house fighting, they decided to withdraw from being active and instead remained passive members. P1M3 also added that there were less team work in the party and if there are any hardworking women members then, they will end up doing everything on their own without help from her female or male counterparts". Then, on the second issue of the refusal to relinquish power, five other respondents (P1M2, P1F2, P1F9, NGO1, NGO2), concur to P1M3's comment. They noted that there are members sitting at the higher echelon of the party had been there for more 20 years.

THE WOMEN'S WING

During my fieldwork, one question that stood outside the pack of my questions is; what precisely is/are the role of women's wing in the political parties in Sarawak? This question became an intrigue subject or topic as the real answer or justification of this so-called Women's Wing is ridiculed with patriarchal deception and exploitation. For the essence of discourse, Women's Wing and based on my findings, the role of Women's Wing is purely for organizing election campaigns for their respective political parties. In essence, they are campaigning for the male political members to be elected by the general populate. Although, few female members are appointed to participate in election, but their appointments is a form of 'token' from the committee members or the leaders of the political parties.

Therefore, the Women's Wing ensures appointed members won their election. This they do through house to house campaigning, distribution of voter's slip etc. In fact, as my literature review correctly noted, most female political party's members are located at the lowest part of the political pinnacle or tagged the 'grass root'. Judiciously, my finding simply refers to them as "the political workers of the political parties" (in the animal kingdom for example: the Ant queen and the workers, Bee Queen and the workers).

The findings from my fieldwork show that the fundamentality of the Women's Wing is entwined with the patriarchal hidden agenda on women. Based on my findings, it is safe therefore to assume that the wing

is established based on the principle of "divide and rule" approach. That is to say women are made to believe that the 'Wing' will foster their political career. However, in reality it is creating a division and discord among the members, as they jostle for internal post or positions within their 'wing'.

There were instances in the women's wing which I considered a "hidden population" that are aware of unhealthy politicking but did not voice out their grievances. Firstly, there were problems such as back stabbing among the women in the political parties and the "yes sir, I agree" attitude which is very much preferred by those in the higher level within the political parties. Secondly, there is a case of women leader who refused to step down or relinquish her post to those who are more qualify and capable. Thirdly, issues on cronyism and nepotism among the women and men members are rampant but no one speaks of it. In fact there were few women leaders that are appointed because of their family or friends connections and have did no significant contribution to help the party's branch. They even refused to relinquish their power and position in order to expand financial rewards. Fourthly, few women entrance into politics seems as 'reluctance politicians' who were brought in not because they were ambitious to be a politician but because of their background. For these women, they have no option but they had to take up the offer.

It is noteworthy that the women who controlled other women were an outcome of a patriarchal divide and rule system. The women's wing is actually an oppressive tool which had been used by those in the upper echelon to impede women who are mostly men. The issue of the women's wing is a political advance to confuse women and create conflicts and disharmony among women. Hence, leaving women with few appointments, hence, making the women felt powerless.

THE POLITICAL PARTIES VERSUS THE SOCIETY

As put forth by the United Nations that political participation derives from freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government. Here, the opportunity to register as a candidate is determined by the political structure. The most common route to elected office is through political parties. Moreover, for most candidates, their nomination depends on the

base or grass root electoral support first, before getting support from the main branch of the political party. This will in turn go to the upper echelon of the political hierarchy who will decide on the final nomination.

It is therefore, important for the candidate to get backing from a political organization especially at the state level, or from that highest level within the political party. Hence, women seeking an entree into politics must usually turn to political parties as the first step to political participation. Here, the opportunity to register as a candidate is determined by the main decision-makers within the political structure. The low rates of women as election candidates in Sarawak highlights the roles of gatekeepers in determining who can successfully run for public office. Malaysia as a nation has continued to change both politically, economically and socially; and more importantly, gender roles have equally continued to reshape to accommodate many previously unacceptable norms in the society. Data gathered during this research process show societal rejection of female representative has dwindled. Based on the data gathered, members of varying ethnic groups in Sarawak are upfront in voting for a candidate that will truly represent and champion their interests and needs at the decision-making level of the state. Most respondents maintained, many of the electorate would vote for candidates based on their ability and not based on gender. Unfortunately, it is the party hierarchies that determine and decide who the electorates votes for. In view of this, many female politicians are unconstitutionally sidelined. They are either forced to make do with being members of Women's Wings or to simply give up their aspiration under the assumption of 'you know how it is', which is a sense of powerlessness.

For example, first the woman has to be a member of the political parties to be recognized and win primary election before she can be considered as party candidate. Through the political parties, the women were controlled since the party decided who should be in or out. Thus, the women are deceived and exploited by allowing the parties leaders to decide for them. Moreover, most of top political positions are allocated for men who then allow close associates or family members to acquire the power by becoming election candidate. Therefore, it retains the status quo by giving the power back to them. Whether they will be good politicians or not, but it is apparent that their coming into politics seems to show their gratitude to the previous leader, so these new politicians are recruited. In other words, there seems to take politics into their hands and making it a family business.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Analysis of the situation discussed above shows that gender imbalance in the party leaderships has deep roots. It is directly connected to the society's acceptance towards gender awareness and gender culture. In turn, this imbalance is apparent at decision-making levels in all areas of public, political and economic life. Based on the respondents' answers, any possibilities of changing the situation will largely depend on how actively political parties especially the political hierarchy in promoting gender equality among its male and female members.

There are obvious instances where women despite their dedication and sufficient representation in political parties, they remained at the bottom of the political party hierarchy and hence not represented in the decision making level of the parties. This undoubtedly indicates a lack of democracy within the political hierarchy of the political parties. I believed that women in the political parties' need more consistent and effective long-term programs which they can get either from the women leaderships or from those in the higher up within the political hierarchy.

Despite the fact that there are women's councils, women institutes and women's bureau set up in Sarawak, they do not play a significant role in women's political development and advancement. No doubt that the women institutes are a non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the women councils and bureau are non political in nature but it is patronized by a female politician and supported by women intellectuals and interest groups. Following the experience of the West and the other Malaysian women, the NGOs played a significant role in getting women candidature during the 1999 General Election in Malaysia. The Malaysian Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) formed in 1998 is an example of a group of women and men seeking to advance women's rights in Malaysia by increasing the number of independent female ministers in Parliament who ran on gender platform. The presence of the women candidate, Zaitun "Toni" Kassim made a great impact when WCI polled approximately 43% of the vote in the constituency, reducing the winning margin for the ruling coalition from 38,627 in the 1995 general elections to 8,835 in the 1999 general elections. Moreover, if in Sarawak, the female politician is the patron for the women councils, institute and bureau, then, it could be a bridge between the women's political participation as party members and social activism through NGOs to create a platform for leadership skills regardless if one chooses or not to join the

political parties. In so doing, the Women's Wing of the political parties would not face the supply of election candidate among the women.

There was also the question about how difficult it was for the women to be in politics. Women with families often experience difficulties, particular in getting permission from their spouses or even asking their spouses to accompany them for social visits or activities. This is so because political activities usually require large investments of time and money and many women hold positions without hoping for financial reward in returns.

There are other issues which are equally very interesting and important to highlight. First is the division among the Youth's Wing, Women's Wing and the central committee. If the Women's wing and the Youth's wing had not existed, I believed that the women are not only fiercely competing against themselves within the Women's Wing but also competing against the Youth Wing which proved to be more powerful and received full support from those in the top positions within the party. Second is the reluctance of the women leaders in organizing leadership skills to train more women in politics is also apparent because of the non-existence of such programs. This is probably distributed to lack of budget.

Women's political participation in Sarawak is still under represented. Therefore, garnering for women's political participation in Sarawak demands more than female initiatives in a society but the male's authority acceptance towards female's presence is indeed very much seek for. It is evident that the causality of the power gap between women and men is very difficult to explain. There are various reasons for female under representation: political hierarchy structure, family background, cultural and religious background, all these influence the probability for women to be involved in politics. Indeed, an increased participation of women in Sarawak will be helpful to change people's minds about their capability to govern and lead the political institutions. However, women should be motivated and trained for political discourses and to speak up for their rights on women's interest. While leadership training and skills is without doubt an important tool towards building women's political participation, there should be an increased awareness on gender issues that should not be restricted only among the women sphere.

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