

## **Women in politics in Malaysia : A brief history**

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**Abstract** : Malaysia is a multi- ethnic society composed of Malays, Chinese, Indians and others. Of about 28 million people, women constitute half of the population. This population ratio, however, is not reflected at the apex level, especially in several decision- making bodies like the cabinet and parliament. This is due to the lower- level of women’s political participation which is largely due to several factors. Specifically, culture, ethnicity and religion play a vital role in shaping the role of women in the politics and government of Malaysia. Women’s participation though increased since independence has not reached the level of acceptability.

**Keywords** : Women in politics, Culture, Ethnicity, Religion, Malaysia.

### **Introduction**

Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states and three Federal territories – Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya.<sup>i</sup> It is a multi-ethnic society, comprising the Malays as the majority who are also known as the Bumiputera (son of the soil), and other minority ethnic groups – Chinese, Indians and others – known as the non-Bumiputera. Women constitute almost half of the population in the country, as in the year 2012 – 14,243.1 million as against 15,093.7 million men.<sup>ii</sup> However, women’s participation in politics, particularly at the apex level, does not reflect their actual number. This can be seen in several decision-making bodies including parliament.<sup>iii</sup>

Since independence in 1957, women’s involvement in politics has increased substantially, which was not the case during the colonial era or even earlier. A historical analysis of “women in politics” suggests four phases : First, women were totally forbidden to enter politics. During the second phase, women took part in the public sphere but focused on cultural activities. In the third phase, women started to become involved in politics, and, lastly, the post-independence period saw women’s advancement in politics. This evolution of women in politics is largely explained by social, cultural, religious, political and institutional factors. This article, therefore, examines the four phases by referring to the forces and factors influencing women’s involvement in politics.

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### **Women in the Pre-Colonial phase**

Culture, ethnicity and religion play a vital role in shaping the position and role of women in the country. The three components were dominant in determining the position before and during the colonial era, and even have prevailed to some extent in the post-independence era.

#### *Culture and ethnicity*

During the colonial period women were generally seen as subordinate to men in all three major ethnic groups : the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. The Malays practiced Adat *Perpatih* or Adat *Temenggong*, the Chinese practiced the Confucian tradition while the Indians held onto the Hindu tradition. All confine women to the domestic area while men dominate the public sphere. The Malay women were confined to the domestic sphere once they reached a certain age (puberty) and were normally placed under strict control. They were taught the art of cooking, sewing, cleaning the house and caring for other siblings. Frank Swettenham's (1948) observation about Malay girls is well-worth quoting:

As a child she does not receive as much attention as a boy, but she is invested with the national garment, a tiny sarong, rather earlier than he is. Whilst the boy is learning to paddle a boat and help his father in any way he can. Or is being taught the aliph-ba-ta (Arabic alphabet) and the readings of the Koran, she is mostly in the house, helps her mother to carry water from the river, morning and evening, when all Malays bathe, and assists in the cooking or any other household work.<sup>iv</sup>

Adat *Perpatih*, as compared to Adat *Temenggong*, acknowledges the importance of women in society, and allows women wider latitude in terms of clan title, property inheritance and as a determinant of their husband's public appointment but they do not occupy any formal religious or political position. The men occupied all religious and political positions and accordingly communicated their opinions and demands for the public behaviour of women.<sup>v</sup> Women in Adat *Temenggong* take decisions in the daily operation of families, such as the amount of money that should be spent, suggestions relating to the marriage of the children, whether the house should be altered, and even for introducing new methods of rice planting.<sup>vi</sup>

There is evidence of some elite Malay women who played a direct role in the politics of the kingdom. In 1771, women were appointed to lead a governmental mission abroad. Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Abidin Muazzam Shah sent a mission led by a woman to Aceh in March, to ask help from the East India Company (*Syarikat Hindia Timur Inggeris*) to stabilize his position and to expel *Bugis* out of Kedah. The mission was successful and returned to Kedah in April 1771. They brought Francis Light with two warships, weaponry and 30 "*orang sepoi*." Several elite women, such as Wan Masheran, Wan Hajar, and Wan Fatimah (Perlis) were significant in the politics of Kedah in the nineteenth century.<sup>vii</sup>

Women were married to rival kings to develop a relationship between kingdoms and to strengthen the power and influence, as well as foster friendly relations. Jamilah Ariffin mentions that women were given in marriage to establish political connections with other kingdoms.<sup>viii</sup> An investigation by Mahani Musa about women in Kedah in 1881-1940, shows that through marriage, the strength and influence of a kingdom or ruling power was developed. Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin III (1854-1879), when conducting a visit to Siam (now Thailand) in 1855, married Wan Jah binti Luang Nik Abidin, a daughter to a Patani king. The marriage was to preserve good relations with Siam, which lasted for a long time. It also benefitted the Sultan of Kedah because it prevented pressure from Siam.<sup>ix</sup> Marriage was also used by the Sultan to strengthen his influence locally. The Sultan married his daughter to a local elite to ensure his throne was guaranteed. The local elites also needed the Sultan as endorsement of his control in the area.<sup>x</sup> Khoo Kay Kim notes that through marriage the members of the royalty and aristocracy were able to secure positions for themselves, thereby eventually enabling them to control resource-rich territories.<sup>xi</sup> Nisriwani and Syed Zulfilda reveals that many Malay princesses had become rulers in their respective kingdoms and were able to bring prosperity and harmony to their kingdoms, thereby becoming very well-known rulers at that time.<sup>xii</sup> However, the involvement of Malay women of the peasant class in politics was unknown.

The subordination of women could also be observed in the traditional Chinese family. The women were confined to the home and their movement was restricted. The women in China were strictly bound by the cultural tradition that determined their position in the family.<sup>xiii</sup> The Confucian belief was reflected in the family structure. The family, regardless of its size, was structured by the dominance of the parents. The distribution of the status and functions was determined by sex and age. Families were patrilocal and patrilineal. The wife, children, servants and concubines were of equal status as the common people, serfs and underlings. Husbands and fathers held the authority and decision making in the families.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the poor families, girls were not favoured and were normally killed. A father had the right to sell or dispose of the unwanted girls. If the family kept their daughters, they rarely received education. They were also trained to be obedient wives and submissive daughters-in-law. As wives, their duties were to submit whole-heartedly to their husbands' families, and produce male children for the continuation of the lineage and for security of the parents in their old age. If their mothers-in-law passed away, provided they had sons at that time, then their status would be higher. However, they were still inferior to other male family members of the same generation or above them.<sup>xv</sup> Their homes were classified as their only rightful place. The furthest they travelled was from their own homes to their in-laws' upon marriage. It was considered highly immoral for women to go out from their homes to seek a living even in pressing conditions like poverty, famine and extreme exploitation by landlords.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Indian women were tied to Hindu tradition. The ideal Hindu woman was one who let men control her. The rules for the behaviour of women are seen in the Laws of Manu, which were written in the early Christian era. The Law of Manu enjoined that :

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent...Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife...<sup>xvii</sup>

When the Indians reached Malaya, several things that they practiced in India had changed, such as, there was no extended patriarchal family of three generations and the absence of an economic base. Many of them worked in rubber plantations and the plantation housing gave them a certain freedom. The expansion of the rubber industry gave Indians, including the women, many income-earning opportunities. The responsibilities for the home and for raising the children remained with the women regardless of whether they were the principal breadwinner in the families or a contributor to its earnings. As Dancz stated, “a wife worked from 5 am until 2 pm, came home, ate, rested, marketed, cleaned house, did the laundry, prepared dinner, saw to the children, sewed and mended clothes, rested or gossiped and went to bed. In doing these tasks, she was helped by other female children. Men, in general, were spared the domestic chores.”<sup>xviii</sup>

### *Religion*

The subordination or domestication of women was also reinforced by religion, which can be seen in all major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Islam is the religion of the majority and came to the Malay Peninsular in the early 1400s. With it came new spiritual standards and ideals, which resulted in assimilation. To a certain extent, a total transformation from the old tradition also took place.<sup>xix</sup>

Although Islam places both men and women as equals before Allah SWT, the subordination or domestication of women can be traced back through various interpretations of *ulama* (Islamic learned scholars) concerning the status of women in the public domain. Zulqarnain and Mohamad Zaidi discuss the views of *ulama* concerning the involvement of women in elections and as members of parliament. They stated that the *ulama* could be divided into two groups, one who prohibited women from being involved in politics and those who permitted. Both based their arguments on *Quranic* verses and Hadith as well as Islamic history. *Ulama* who did not support the involvement of women in politics based their argument on several *Quranic* verses (4 : 34; 2 : 28; etc.) and such sayings of the Prophet (SAW) that “Men would perish if they obey women”(Telah binasalah kaum lelaki ketika mereka mentaati kaum wanita). Furthermore, they argued that women are biologically and emotionally different from men. Consequently, Allah SWT has ordained that all mankind should work depending upon the existence and suitability.<sup>xx</sup>

In Hinduism, the religion of most Indians, women are deemed to be inferior to men. It views women as dangerous and also benevolent, fertile and a bestower. In a popular myth it shows the male controlling dangerous female power, thus, making it positive and

benevolent. Kali (the Black One), one of the many wives of Siva, was sent by the gods to fight a demon and his army, when the gods could not control him by themselves. Kali defeated the demons. Due to her victory, she performed a savage killing dance so furiously that the earth trembled beneath her weight and its destruction appeared imminent. The gods, who sent her, were unable to stop her, and sent Siva to stop her. Not noticing her husband, Kali continued dancing and killing, until Siva lay down at her feet. When Kali realized that it was her husband upon whom she was placing her feet, she stopped her dance and the earth was saved, because her husband had regained control over her.<sup>xxi</sup> The religion later translated or practised by the Indians resulted in the subordination of women.

The Confucian, the belief system of many Chinese, was founded by Confucius in the period from 770 B.C to 476 B.C. Confucianism was adopted by the Han Dynasty in order to consolidate their reign. It was accepted as the state ideology and other ideologies were banned to maintain law, with social stratification and social order according to Confucian values. It was propagated that the ruler was to be a father to his people and look after their basic needs. It encouraged officials to be loyal to their rulers and refuse to serve the corrupt; it also advocated absolute authority of a king over his subjects, a husband over his wife and a father over his sons and stressed five constant virtues and ethical codes; namely benevolence (*Ren*), righteousness (*Yi*), propriety (*Li*), wisdom (*Zhi*) and fidelity (*Xin*). The women had no dignity or human rights. They had to obey their fathers absolutely when they were not married, obey their husbands absolutely after wedlock and obey their sons absolutely in their widowhood. Women were expected to demonstrate exemplary behaviour and uncomplaining obedience.<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Women during the Colonial Era**

Malaya has been occupied by several powers. As mentioned by M. Thambirajah, the earliest foreign occupation of Malaya was during the fifth century, when a government called Funan from Indochina controlled many areas including the northern Peninsular of Malaya. Srivijaya from Sumatera expanded into Malaya in the tenth century and was followed by Singhasari from Jawa in the thirteenth century who occupied various parts of Malaya.<sup>xxiii</sup> It was in the early sixteenth century that the Portuguese invaded Malacca (part of Malaya). This was followed by the Dutch who occupied Malacca from 1641 to 1824. The British occupied Malacca in 1824, and remained in Malaya until 1957.<sup>xxiv</sup> A brief withdrawal of the British from Malaya took place when the Japanese occupied Malaya from 1942 until 1945. When the Japanese lost in the Second World War, the British returned to Malaya.<sup>xxv</sup> Thus, it can be seen that Malaya (now Malaysia) has been occupied by several foreign powers. The era of the Japanese occupation and the return of the British after Japan's defeat were reported to mark women's involvement in the public realm politically.<sup>xxvi</sup> However, the involvement of women in the non-political public sphere dates back much earlier. This will be discussed later in this article.

### *Non-political organizations*

The involvement of women in the public realm can be seen in the non-political organizations. They engaged in associations that basically aimed to care for the welfare of women as well as to improve education among the women, particularly female children. The religious missionary movement (i.e. Christian and Buddhist), awareness and altruism of educated women and national spirit were among the major factors that contributed to the set-up of these associations.<sup>xxvii</sup> While women from other ethnicities distanced themselves from political involvement, there was evidence that the Chinese women were the first to become involved in politics.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### *The MALAY women*

Malay women started becoming involved in the public sphere through involvement in the non-political organizations. The activities were mainly to cater for the welfare of the Malays, particularly the women and the girls.

One of the early Malay women's organizations, which was formed in 1929, was the Malay Women Teachers' Union (Persekutuan Guru-Guru Perempuan Johor, PGPJ). It was established by Zainun binti Suleiman famously known as Ibu Zain. She was one of the two Malay women who attended English school. PGPJ was a voluntary association to upgrade the lives of women. The activities were confined to cooking, needlework and religious classes. The aim of the Union was to improve the knowledge of its members.<sup>xxix</sup> Their other main concern was the failure of the Malay girls at school, to improve their performance and to increase the number of Malay girls in school who were hitherto prevented by their parents due to the usage of the English language. In addition, with the collaboration of the Teachers' Union with the ruling government at that time, a Malay Women's Training College (MWTC) was set up in Malacca in 1935 offering educational training for two years in the field of cooking, sewing and other household management skills.<sup>xxx</sup>

Another women's association, the Malay Ladies Association, was set up in Johor in 1940 by Azizah Jaafar. Although it was managed by her mother, a British national, it was supported by many elite women, the wives of leaders in the state. The main objective of this association was to enable the wives of these leaders to perform social work for society, such as to offer reading and writing for adults and classes relating to cooking and sewing.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Saberkas was set up in 1944 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, a member of the ruling family in Kedah, together with other Malay intellectuals of Arabic, Malay and English educational background. Saberkas aimed to improve the welfare of the Malays and was supported by farmers, students, petty traders and female vernacular schoolteachers, as well as housewives.<sup>xxxii</sup> Saberkas had set up its own schools and support classes in rural areas or in areas that had no school. The association was committed to combat illiteracy and also urged the government not to discriminate against girls when it came to education. Some of their students furthered their studies overseas and many became

officials in government. It also provided shelter for the homeless. Although the extent of women's involvement in the association's decision-making body remains unclear,<sup>xxxiii</sup> it comprised its own women's section, which was successful in sending a woman to further her studies overseas.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

A Malay cultural welfare association was formed in Johor in 1888. It was called *Pakatan Belajar Mengajar Pengetahuan Bahasa* (Society for the Learning and Teaching Linguistic Knowledge). It was devoted to language issues, such as finding equivalent Malay language terms for English terms used in government and administration. This association tried to develop an ethnic feeling among the Malays.<sup>xxxv</sup> However, nothing was mentioned about women's involvement. In conclusion, it can be seen that the Malay women's involvement in the public sphere during this period was primarily to cater to the welfare of the Malays, and, in particular, the women and the girls.

#### *The Chinese women*

There were several Chinese associations. In the 1930s, the number of Chinese women entering Malaya and Singapore was increasing. The women were involved in associations that mainly dealt with religious matters, in particular, Buddhism (Buddhist nunneries and vegetarian houses). There were also associations concerned with the welfare of the Chinese women that provided various services to them. One of the earliest associations was the Chinese Ladies Association of Singapore, which catered to the welfare of the Chinese women and teenagers. Among its activities were conducting cooking classes, baking, and sewing.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The involvement of the Chinese women in the associations was devoted to social matters. However, there was evidence that the Chinese women in this era were already actively engaged in politics. Wong Sau Ying, although not a local, had spent a considerable period in Penang, and had been entrusted with the task of assassinating Sir Laurence Guillemard, the High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States and the Governor of the Straits Settlements, in Penang in 1925. She did not have the opportunity and went with an explosive to the Chinese Protectorate in Kuala Lumpur, injuring the Protector of the Chinese and two of his associates. She was apprehended and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. She committed suicide by hanging herself while serving the sentence.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Although, there was direct involvement in politics, the roles that women played were most likely executing orders that were delegated to them.

#### *The Indian women*

The Indians grouped themselves on the basis of caste, regional origin, religion and occupation prior to the Second World War. The associations also dealt with the social welfare issues of the Indians. The Indian Association of Taiping was formed in 1906, and was later followed by similar associations in Selangor, Perak, Penang and Malacca. All these associations were formed to meet the social needs of the Indian community. The associations were dominated by businessmen and professionals. Women were not called to become involved in these associations.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The Indian *Khalsa Diwan Selangor* was set up in 1917 by Indians of the Sikh religion. The association, besides dealing with religious and ritual activities, also engaged in improving education among its members. They set up schools, particularly for the girls to enable them to obtain formal education. This association influenced several Sikh women in other areas to expand their activities and tried to combine all these small groups of women. The highlight of this effort was the commencement of the Sikh Women Conference, first held in Malaya in 1933, which led to the setting up of a women's association called *Isteri Sangh Sabha* in Sentul, Selangor.<sup>xxxix</sup> Another Indian association that was set up in this period was *Adi Dravidar Sangham*. It was established in 1928 to eliminate social insult towards Indians in the lower caste. It aimed to restore a new identity of higher self-esteem among its members who were in the inferior caste through the Dravidar ideology and culture. Several associations that carried a similar mission were set up in the 1930s. However, there is no record of women being involved in this association.<sup>xi</sup>

#### *Women of other ethnic groups*

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was originally set up in Singapore by Sophia Cooke, a female Anglican-missionary teacher, born in England in 1814.<sup>xii</sup> The YWCA, based in Britain, later expanded to many Commonwealth countries including the Malay Peninsular at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The YWCA was opened in several towns, namely, Penang in 1909, Kuala Lumpur in 1913, Malacca in 1921 and Ipoh in 1930.<sup>xiii</sup> Among the early activities conducted by the YWCA were monthly meetings among the women discussing about home life, Bible reading and visits to the needy and the sick in hospitals. Chinese, European and Eurasian women were involved in these activities.<sup>xiii</sup> However, among the significant social services that the YWCA in the Malay Peninsular rendered was the setting up of a childcare centre for women labourers in 1938 by YWCA Penang. The service appeared to be a help to the women and enabled them to focus on their work.<sup>xiv</sup>

In conclusion, it can be seen that the early involvement of women in the public sphere was not political in nature. Although there is evidence that Chinese women were involved in politics in the ear before Japanese occupation, this was exceptional. While the activities carried out by Wong Say Ying constituted a political act, she was most likely carrying out the party's mission rather than participating in the decision-making in the party. In addition, as has been shown in the earlier section there is evidence that the Malay women had already engaged directly in the state's politics and administration as early as the seventh century until the eighteenth century. However, this was confined to the aristocratic and elite class.<sup>xv</sup> The involvement of women of different ethnicities and of the non-elite class in the public sphere was mainly in associations that were non-political and it was mainly targeted to improve the lives of the people of the respective ethnic groups, particularly the women.

### *Political arena*

The turning point of direct participation of women was the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and the return of the British after the Second World War until the country achieved independence.<sup>xlvi</sup> Although different sources produced the direct involvement of the women of different ethnicities in politics, Japanese policy and nationalism were the primary impetus for all women to engage in politics more actively, particularly the Malay women. Education was also a contributing factor for women to engage directly in politics, and political parties played a role in organizing the women more systematically.

### **The Japanese policy**

The Japanese practised varying policies in respect to the different ethnic groups in Malaya, which produced negative feelings towards the Japanese.

It was reported that the Japanese had encouraged the Malay women to enter the working sector because the former had urged the Malay men to participate in the war efforts. Thus, due to the pressing situation, thousands of Malay women accepted jobs outside their homes. They engaged in various occupations, such as teachers, clerks, telephonists, traders as well as worked in the fields (i.e. growing cotton and food).<sup>xlvii</sup> This contributed towards the involvement of the Malay women in the public realm, which was contrary to the previous practice where women stayed at home to cater to the needs of their families. The Japanese also organized the Malay women in various organizations. Their functions were to encourage women to work, aid war relief work and to co-operate with food cultivation.<sup>xlviii</sup> Although, the Japanese created public opportunities for the Malay women, “the women expressed fierce dislike of the Japanese and an indignation against everyone responsible for the occupation.”<sup>xlix</sup> The women saw that the schools they had set up were left to deteriorate and the girls were forced to sit at home due to the dire situation they faced. Raja Rohana Raja Mamat stated that it was the Japanese who had planted the seed for the political consciousness of the women. The Japanese military had forced the women into the denial of their fundamental rights : to eat and to live safely without the presence of threats and violence by the soldiers. Mothers and girls hid due to fear.<sup>l</sup> Unemployment, extensive use of forced labour, scarcity of food, medical and hospital supplies as well as other goods were the prevailing features during that period. Poverty was also acute.<sup>li</sup> Japanese intelligence, known as *Tekikan*, functioned to identify people who defied the Japanese. The Japanese also recruited the locals to be their intelligence. Furthermore, *Kempetai*, a Japanese body, tortured whosoever they suspected of being rebellious,<sup>lii</sup> which was applied to all the people in Malaya and caused great fear among them.

Compared to the Malay women, the Chinese women received harsher treatment from the Japanese. The Japanese perceived them as enemies like the Chinese in China. Rape by the Japanese men was a widespread issue during that time.<sup>liii</sup> The Chinese who refused to cooperate were dealt with severely : confiscation of property, deportation of entire families with prohibition of re-entry or capital punishment.<sup>liv</sup> The most famous means of

intimidating the Chinese men or women was beheading, with the heads being publicly displayed thereafter. Harsh treatment and the disappearance of Chinese men was a normal occurrence during the occupation.<sup>lv</sup> The Chinese had become adept in surviving the situation. It was reported that two thousand Chinese people joined the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) and 300,000 joined the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Union (MPAJU).<sup>lvi</sup>

The Indian women, however, were not treated as harshly as the Chinese, as the Japanese saw the Indians as a source of forced labour as well as a means to overcome the British in India and Burma (Myanmar).<sup>lvii</sup> The Indian women were directly involved in the Indian Independence League (IIL), which aimed to achieve independence for India, led by Subhas Chandra Bose. The women became involved in the Rani of Jhansi Brigade, a women's section in the military unit. They not only raised funds for the IIL, but also taught and performed many functions, such as medical and nursing services, cleaning, as well as carrying guns.<sup>lviii</sup>

In general, the occupation of the Japanese was a terrifying period for all the people in Malaya and impacted the women from the various ethnic groups differently. To the extreme, it had driven the Chinese and the Indian to become involved directly in the anti-Japanese organizations and to fight for their respective independence, while for the Malay women, it planted political seeds through the realisation of the undesirable effects of the occupation.

### **Nationalism**

The involvement of women in politics could be associated with the growth of nationalism in the country. The rise of nationalism in the country was due to several events that, ultimately, mobilized the women to become more actively and directly involved in politics.

First, the introduction of the Malayan Union (MU) by the British after the Japanese occupation also emerged as a major booster towards women's active involvement in politics. The MU was a form of government by the British to unify the three administrations of the states in Malaya.<sup>lix</sup> The MU's proposal became public in 1946 and created massive opposition from the Malay, men and women, without exception. The MU proposed that the Malay Rulers be replaced by a central government headed by a British Governor. The Malay Rulers would only function through the Malay Advisory Council on matters relating to the Malay religion or customs. Citizenship was to be granted to all born in the MU and Singapore, as well as those who had resided therein for ten out of the past 15 years. All would have the right to elect and serve in a government, and have access to posts in the civil service.<sup>lx</sup>

The strongest opposition towards the MU came from the Malays. They were not happy about i) the citizenship being given to the non-Malays, which would mark the end of special rights and position of the Malays in Malaya, ii) the proposals not being

discussed with the Malays, iii) the way the signatures of the Sultans were obtained – by using threats, and iv) the political power of the Sultans being reduced.<sup>lxi</sup>

The largest opposition movement was led by Datuk Onn Jaafar, through his *Pergerakan Melayu Semenanjung* (Movement of Peninsular Malays). It was established on 10 February 1946, with 15,000 Malay members including 450 women.<sup>lxii</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1946, 115 representatives from 42 Malay groups met following the call from Datuk Onn, which resulted in the formation of UMNO (United Malays National Organization). The original name was United Malays Organization (UMO), but Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (Za'ba) proposed the inclusion of the word “national” to stimulate the national spirit in fighting for the Malays. Thus, the name was changed from UMO to UMNO.<sup>lxiii</sup> Thus, the Malays established UMNO to unite the Malays and fight the MU collectively.

The women, particularly the Malays, were directly involved in politics during this period. They started their political activities by demonstrating their challenge to the MU plan. Their participation at this stage was seen as an extension of their male counterparts' politics, which was aimed to advance “the interests of their ethnic group.”<sup>lxiv</sup> The British representatives were amazed by the opposition shown by the Malay women who, hitherto, had not been visible in the public sphere. One of them reported that :

In the towns there were demonstrations with 5,000 to 10,000 people standing in front of us. But the most remarkable things of all was the part the women were playing in this great national movement. In the 14 years I lived in Malaya I scarcely ever spoke to a Malay woman. But today they go up on political platforms and make speeches; unmarried girls make speeches through microphones that would not have disgraced anybody in this committee.<sup>lxv</sup>

Besides demonstrating, the women also actively participated in expressing their opposition. A young female schoolteacher named Zahrah binti Abdullah, a member of *Pergerakan Melayu Semenanjung*, addressed the British representatives in the following words :

We women were greatly surprised when we were completely ignored by Sir Harold MacMichael. We will not agree to a MU whatever happens. We make our protest strongly. We will work with our men to regain our rights. In short, we don't like the union.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Opposition from the Malay women could be seen from the normal class of people as well as the elite groups, actively demonstrating in the streets and carrying banners. It took place in many states.<sup>lxvii</sup>

It could be seen that the Malay women engaged in politics with the consciousness to free the country from any foreign power as well as to preserve the status quo of the Malays and the Malay Sultans in the country. Although their involvement in politics during this period was mostly encouraged by male political activists who recognized the obvious advantage in mobilizing women to help them achieve their nationalist goal,<sup>lxviii</sup>

these were the stepping-stones for the women to become involved in politics, an area that previously was “forbidden” to women.

While the Malay women were looking to free Malaya from the British as a result of the Malayan Union plan, the Indian women were inspired and became actively engaged in politics to liberate their country of origin, India. As mentioned earlier, the Japanese had used the Indians to fulfil their political and security needs during the Second World War. The Japanese needed a piece of land in India as a strategic point to encounter the British in Myanmar as well as to neutralize the British influence in India. Thus, the Japanese had encouraged the Indians to rule their country and promised to help them in this cause. This had created nationalist feelings among the Indians. Subhas Chandra Bose, a charismatic Indian leader, obtained full Japanese support, and was capable of drawing the massive Indian community to listen to his speeches and aspirations. With the spirit to free their country of origin, Bose, mobilized the Indian community including men and women. Under his leadership, the Indian Independence League (ILL) with branches in Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Penang and Singapore, created 12 departments in the League, 12 ministries for the government with one department and one ministry dealing with women’s affairs. Both were headed by women. The women’s section was active in raising funds, collecting supplies for the Indian Nationalist Army (INA) and teaching Hindustani at their schools in Malaya. The women were also involved in the fighting unit in the women’s section of INA called the Rani of Jhansi Brigade.<sup>lxi</sup> Thus, it can be seen that due to a highly nationalistic feeling to liberate India, Indian women became directly involved in politics and even took up arms alongside men, contradicting their traditional roles in the community.

The new and aggressive Chinese nationalism started in the 1920s and 1930s. It was popularized by Dr Sun Yat Sen whose mission was i) to set up the Republic of China, ii) to overthrow the Manchu people, iii) to end all foreign powers in China, and iv) to unite all areas in China under one central government. Through his party named Tung Meng Hui, which was later renamed as Koumintang (KMT), he called all Chinese to be loyal to the country,<sup>lxx</sup> through the concept of *Minzu* (meaning “race” and “nation”).<sup>lxxi</sup> His ideas were supported by many of the Chinese in South China, as well as overseas, such as Belgium, France, the United States and countries in South East Asia.<sup>lxxii</sup> This nationalism was successfully introduced in Malaya when Dr Sun arrived in Singapore and successfully instigated the growth of Chinese nationalism among the Chinese in Malaya.<sup>lxxiii</sup> These interests were channelled through two main organizations : the KMT and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).<sup>lxxiv</sup> The active involvement of Chinese women could be seen when it was reported that approximately 30% of the members in the MCP were women. In the MCP, the women were in combat on the same terms as male soldiers.<sup>lxxv</sup> Thus, it can be seen that women from these ethnic groups, the Malays, the Indians and the Chinese were directly and actively involved in politics, and the nationalistic spirit for their respective countries of origin also influenced them.

## Education

Education emerged as the crucial factor in contributing towards the active involvement of women of these three ethnic groups in politics. For the Malays, it was in the early twentieth century that female education was given higher importance by the parents. This was due to the rapid development of the Malay intellectuals and the rapid growth of the schools for boys, which had driven the parents to think about the education of their daughters. In Kedah, for instance, in the 1920s, the government received many applications from the people to set up schools for female children. When many Malay parents realized the importance of education for the future of their children, many sent both their sons and daughters to school of various mediums of instruction, inside Malaya as well as outside Malaya.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

The Malay women who were educated in the religious medium, particularly in Indonesia, were seen later when they had finished their education, actively and directly engaged in the politics in Malaya. It was evident that the first women's political association, AWAS, was pioneered by women who received religious education from religious schools in Sumatra in Indonesia. Its leaders were Aishah Ghani, who studied in the Diniyah Puteri Sumatra, Indonesia,<sup>lxxvii</sup> Samsiah Fakeh, who started schooling at two Malay schools in Negeri Sembilan until standard five and later enrolled at Madrasah Tuddimiah Padang Panjang, Sumatera Barat for two years;<sup>lxxviii</sup> and Sakinah Junid who also received education in a religious school in Sumatera.<sup>lxxix</sup>

The religious schools in Sumatra attracted the rural Malay elite families, particularly the religious groups in the Peninsula, due to their belief that the existing education for women in the Christian English medium schools was highly unsuitable for their daughters. This was due to the Christian morals that were included in the educational curriculum and due to the preservation of radical Islamic teaching. The majority of the teachers were local Indonesian scholars, highly nationalistic and anti-colonial in their teaching and sentiments. In accordance with the Islamic teachings, the students learnt the technique of public oration and political debate and effectively used their knowledge of Islamic law (*fiqh*) and philosophy to develop political consciousness, which rejected Western systems of administration and power over Muslim nations. The female students also learned reading and writing skills, experienced public oration and debates, which developed a fair amount of self-esteem and confidence in the world of men. They also mixed with the Indonesian children the majority of whom were the children of political detainees.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Rashida Khanam mentions that the Raden Kartini factor, a Dutch-educated Javanese woman, who called for the education of women – Western and religious education – and had inspired the women in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) to acquire knowledge, had taken them to another dimension in the 1930s, when the women were actively involved in the national movement in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Thus, it was religious education in Indonesia that created the awareness among the Malay women concerning the importance of ruling their country on their own without intervention from

any external power. This was intensified after witnessing the cruelty of the Dutch against the local people. Aishah Ghani stated that she was exposed to the fiery exhortations of freedom fighters there. The republic at that time was on course for independence and the atrocities committed by the Dutch colonialists stoked the nationalistic spirit in her.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Thus, it can be seen that education, not only empowered them intellectually but also enlightened them to become directly involved in politics and the public sphere in general.

In the case of the Chinese women, education also contributed directly to their involvement in politics. Until 1938, the Chinese schools were the most numerous compared to other schools in Malaya. There were 996 Chinese schools, followed by 788 Malay schools, 607 Tamil schools and 271 English schools.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Through Adrianna Tan's study of "The forgotten women warriors of the Malayan Communist Party," it was discovered that the women had become involved in the MCP due to their socialization in schools. She stated that :

The activism and social awareness in the Chinese schools provided a fertile breeding ground for future members of the party ... the hardy female member of the Politburo and leader of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion began revolutionary activities as a direct result of the anti-Japanese resistance popular in Chinese schools in the early 1940s.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Since the majority of the Chinese attended Chinese language schools,<sup>lxxxv</sup> education provided an effective impetus in giving political awareness to the Chinese, and, subsequently, encouraged them to join organizations of a political nature. The Federation of Chinese High School Unions was outlawed by the colonial government because it instilled revolutionary ideas in the villagers. When the school was outlawed, renewed anti-colonial and politically radicalized sentiments were commonly found among the students.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> It was also reported that the MPAJA (Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army) had established a school named *Sekolah Latihan Khas 101*, which aimed to instil anti-Japanese spirit among the people and most of its members were Chinese. They were trained by the British in guerrilla war tactics to fight the Japanese.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The number of men and women in the MPAJA rose from 3,000 in 1942 to 7,000 in 1945.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> It can be seen that, through education, the Chinese, in this context, women, had been exposed to politics and gained awareness, and, eventually, engaged in politics directly.

The Indians during the Japanese Occupation were united in the spirit to rule their own country, called "Azad Hind." The Indians, from various classes accepted the call, not only to free India but also to protect the Indians interest under the Japanese. It was reported that approximately 350,000 Indians joined IIL and INA.<sup>lxxxix</sup> It was also reported that hundreds of women participated in this cause. Children aged as young as seven until 16 joined under the *Balak Sena* team. The only factor that drove them was nationalism.<sup>xc</sup> Although this nationalism could be triggered by many factors, it was education that proved effective in mobilizing the women and Indians as a whole into politics.

It was reported that the women's section of the IIL performed many functions including teaching Hindustani in the 50 "national" schools that were set up in Malaya,

besides active socialization with the Indian communities.<sup>xc<sup>i</sup></sup> Then, after the defeat of the Japanese, the united bond among the Indians diminished as they defined themselves according to class very visibly. This had affected the lower class Indians, the Tamils very badly. Although many attempts had been made through cooperation among associations, it was the schools that were able to restore and project the Tamil spirit and identity more effectively.<sup>xc<sup>ii</sup></sup> These school leavers, afterwards, gained political awareness about their rights in politics, which motivated more Tamils to participate in the MIC.<sup>xc<sup>iii</sup></sup> Thus, it can be seen that education had encouraged the Indians to gain political awareness, and, they eventually became involved in politics.

### **Political party**

The direct and active involvement of women in politics can be seen through their involvement in the political parties. Political parties, to a certain extent, had utilized women to achieve their political goals, which, in return, had resulted in women becoming involved in politics actively and directly.

As for the Malay women, the first women's association that was political in nature, called AWAS or *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (The Progressive Malay Women's Corps), was set up in 1945. It was a women's wing of the Malaysian National Party (*Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya, PKMM*) and Aishah Ghani was its first leader. Its pioneers also included Samsiah Fakeh and Sakinah Junid.<sup>xc<sup>iv</sup></sup> Initially, the women's department/section under PKMM did not have any name, it was simply known as the Women's Section of PKMM (*Bahagian Wanita PKMM*).<sup>xc<sup>v</sup></sup> Later the PKMM leader, Ahmad Boestamam (leader of the youth section, API), proposed that the women's section to be named as *Angkatan Wanita Sedar*. The official name of AWAS was used in 1946. During the state of emergency in 1948, AWAS was later banned by the British due to its radicalism. It had existed for two and half years.<sup>xc<sup>vi</sup></sup>

The PKMM needed the women to fight for independence and to increase awareness among the women of their emancipation. It reported that one of its male leaders had mentioned that the women were asked to join the party "to arouse in Malay women the consciousness of equal rights they have with men, to free them from old bonds of tradition and to socialize them."<sup>xc<sup>vii</sup></sup> The second leader of AWAS, Shamsiah Fakeh, in her memoir, mentioned that in the cause of fighting for independence she became aware of the discrimination against women in the feudalistic system, as well as capitalism and imperialism. Women were also discriminated against by men, outdated customs, religious rules and others. It was her duty as the women's leader to increase the status of living of the women, to achieve equal rights between men and women and to free women from discrimination. To her, achieving independence was the first step towards the freedom of women.<sup>xc<sup>viii</sup></sup>

Another Malay political party, which experienced the active involvement of women, was UMNO. Kaum Ibu (KI) initially comprised many Malay women movements and associations. It was founded in almost all the states in Malaya and shared similar

objectives, which, among others, included improving the status of women, reducing illiteracy, instilling patriotism and opposing the MU. With the call to unite in order to face MU, three women representatives from these women movements forwarded their interest in UMNO's first general assembly in 1946 to have a women's section.<sup>xcix</sup> The three women were Che Puteh Mariah representing the Malay Society of Perak, Che Zainab Abdul Rahman representing the Women's Society of Province Wellesley and Che Saleha Ali representing the Women's Society of Selangor. The proposal was strongly supported by its president Datuk Onn. Che Puteh Mariah headed the Kaum Ibu Department, which later grew into a secretariat that officially came into being in 1949.<sup>c</sup> Later it developed and transformed into *Pergerakan Wanita* UMNO in August 1971.<sup>ci</sup>

In the early stages, the women in KI were mainly entrusted with conducting pre-election activities, such as campaigning, setting up polling booths, and getting voters to the polls. The house-to-house campaigning was the most effective and helpful to UMNO to increase its voters. In addition, due to KI, the Malay women were more aware of their political rights and more conscious of their surroundings. Active participation from the literate as well as illiterate Malay women was noticeable.<sup>cii</sup> Later on, in the early 50s, just before independence, the women wanted to contest in the election. In 1953, the third KI leader, Khatijah Sidek, forwarded a pro-active demand to put women as electoral candidates and as representatives in the state and federal legislature. In 1954, the KI had handed in their resolution to the main body of UMNO in their congress. There was resistance from the men, and the women had threatened to boycott the future general elections. Due to the boycott, a woman, Halimathon Abdul Majid was nominated for the Federal Legislative Council as a state-level candidate in 1955. She was the first Malay woman to be elected into the Council.<sup>ciii</sup>

The Chinese women's involvement began long after the Malays, with less significant roles. Although the women's section was set up in 1951, under the "Women and Youth" sub-committee, it was 1953 that witnessed women in the MCA being organized into a section through the Johor Baharu branch. The women, although not as developed as the women in KI, had contributed greatly in their party in the 1955 state and federal council elections.<sup>civ</sup>

The Indian women took part in establishing the Indian political party, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in August 1946. The women were Janaky Thevar Nahappan and Mrs Lobo from Singapore. The Indian women at large, however, did not get involved in the MIC activities although they were encouraged to do so. A national women's section was not in existence until 1975, however, women's sections at the state level existed in the 1950s through the efforts of its women members. As reported by one MIC official, the women were encouraged to join in the 1950s and 1960s because they were voters and useful in elections.<sup>cv</sup>

However, the women, from the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, in the later period of the colonial era were seen to be involved in political parties or organizations of a political nature. They became involved to support their respective parties or

organizations to achieve their desired objectives, which included evicting the colonial power, ruling the country or protecting the welfare of its people and others. However, the Malay women, as compared to the Chinese and Indian women, were more pro-active in claiming their share in the political parties.

In conclusion, it can be seen that in the later phase of the colonial era, the women of all ethnic groups were involved in the political arena. This was due to the different policies practised by the Japanese in respect of the three ethnic groups, which impacted them differently, and resulted in creating political seeds among the Malay women. Another factor that caused the women to engage in politics in this era was nationalism. The Malay women directly participated in politics to oppose the MU plans introduced by the British; the Chinese women were looking to Chinese nationalism introduced by Dr Sun Yat Sen; and the Indian women aspired to free and rule their country, India, under "Azad Hind." Education had also played an important role in raising political awareness, particularly among the Malay and Chinese women, as well as the Indian women. Political parties, through utilizing the women to achieve their respective goals had, directly or indirectly, resulted in women participating in politics, except for the Malay women, who later claimed their own women's section much earlier than the other groups and much more effectively.

### **Women in the post-independence Era**

As the nation achieved independence and progressed, the women gradually engaged themselves in the public realm including the political sphere, which was previously remote to them. The involvement of women in politics in this era showed a different degree of participation compared to the earlier phases. This could be explained in two sub-phases : the early and the modern.

#### *The Early phase*

The early decades after the country's independence marked a high rate of development activity.<sup>cvi</sup> Health facilities expanded rapidly,<sup>cvi</sup> employment increased and education improved significantly.<sup>cvi</sup> Statistics show that 2,855 individuals finished university education in 1965, which increased to 8,505 in 1970, while enrolment in primary school increased from 1,217,309 in 1965 to 1,421,469 in 1970.<sup>cix</sup>

Although the country marked development in many areas, women's involvement in politics was not very encouraging. A detailed study concerning women in political parties in Malaysia by Virginia H. Dancz revealed that although some women became more active and aggressive in claiming their share in their respective political parties, for example, women in KI UMNO had demanded seats in the state and federal legislatures, other women were still struggling to establish a women's section and attract other women to participate in their respective parties, for example, MCA and MIC. Furthermore, although some women had established a section, such as *Dewan Muslimat* (DM) PAS, they still had minimal voices in the party. Nevertheless, they were very crucial in garnering support from Malays, particularly the women. In the 70s, they started to push

for wider roles of women in DM, such as to become involved in other public activities and societal issues. Some women's groups, such as *Wanita Rakyat* of *Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaya* (PSRM), were poorly organized and the Labour Party organized the women on an ad-hoc basis.<sup>cx</sup> These women largely functioned to support the respective parties, particularly in the elections.

### *The Modern phase*

This era marked a shift from an agricultural-based economy to a manufacturing and industry-based economy, which started in the 1980s under the premiership of the fourth Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. With the mission to achieve the Vision 2020, to be an industrialized country, many areas – economy, politics, social and culture – were improved and developed.<sup>cx</sup>

Malaysian women had made significant progress due to education, employment opportunities and changes in the socio-cultural environment, enabling them to participate effectively in all aspects of the country's development. They became significant contributors to the country's economy. In 2005, the female labour force increased to 3.7 million from 3.3 million in 2000.<sup>cxii</sup> In 1995, there were 43,945 women enrolled in public university, which increased to 110,699 by 2000.<sup>cxiii</sup> They also emerged as strong and influential voters as they constituted almost half of the population of the country. The empowerment of women in the country was due to the various policies and agencies introduced by the government. The more important ones, in terms of policies and plans, were the National Development Plan-NDPs (Rancangan Malaysia), which started a specific chapter on women in development in its Sixth Development Plan, National Policy of Women introduced in 1989 (revised in 2009), Women's Action Plan in 1997 and 30 per cent Women as Decision Makers in 2004.<sup>cxiv</sup>

In addition, several government bodies were established to empower women and boost their interests in national development. Among the major ones were the National Advisory Council on the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID), a consultative body comprising women NGOs and the government. They conducted research relating to women and collaboration with various local and international organizations, following which they would communicate to the government the issues or problems being faced by the women. The highest machinery that deals with women's affairs in Malaysia is the Ministry of Women's Development, which was set up in 2001. As its functions were later expanded to include family and community development, it was renamed as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2004.<sup>cxv</sup> Thus, these plans and agencies resulted in active participation of women in economic and social development.

As a result of the various measures introduced by the government, women have made significant progress in politics. The number of women participating in the respective political parties also increased. For example, in MCA, there were 148,734 women members in 1980, which increased to 158,555 in 1990, and then increased to

more than double in 2001 comprising 331,085 members. Although the primary functions of women in the MCA remained unchanged (to uphold the party's philosophy), the women moved further to lead its women members to be more active in politics, help in the nation building, uplift women's status and promote gender equality. The women were also given leadership training by the MCA Political Education Bureau.<sup>cxvi</sup> There were approximately one million female members in Wanita UMNO. Besides Wanita UMNO, UMNO also expanded to include male and female youth among its members. The female youth are known as PUTERI UMNO (officially launched in 2001), while the male youth are known as PUTERA UMNO. In 2009, PUTERI UMNO comprised 328,165 members and 19,200 branches in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah.<sup>cxvii</sup> PUTERI UMNO's members are aged between 18 and 35 years. One of its main tasks was to train and select young Malay women as potential leaders.<sup>cxviii</sup>

The women's wing of PAS, *Dewan Muslimat* (DM) comprised 8,182 members in 1966, which increased to 10,000 in 2001. Even though welfare and community related activities were among its major programmes, it also organizes leadership training for its female members from time to time and at various levels. DM's highest authority would ensure that leadership exposure was given to all its members.<sup>cxix</sup>

The increased participation of women in politics in this era was further enhanced by the newly-established political party, the People's Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*), which was set up in 1999. It later merged with Malaysia's People Party (*Parti Rakyat Malaysia*) in 2003 and was renamed as the National Justice Parti (*Parti Keadilan Nasional*). Its women members also made a mark, as one became the president of the party and several women were elected as members of parliament.<sup>cxx</sup>

The participation of women in politics was further advanced when some of them, particularly those from the ruling coalition parties were included in the higher level public decision-making bodies. They were appointed ministers, deputy ministers as well as senators in the upper house (*Dewan Negara*).<sup>cxxi</sup> The number of women elected in the lower house, *Dewan Rakyat*, has also increased throughout the years, from 3 women in 1964 to 11 in 1990 and to 168 in 2013.<sup>cxxii</sup>

In spite of the achievements and progress made by women during these years, and with numerous institutional measures, there is still a gender gap between men and women in the political sphere. Although there is an increase in membership in political parties, political candidates and appointments to elected and appointed offices, the gender gap still exists between men and women in terms of access to high-level positions and participation in decision making. Women, as compared to men, remain far fewer in number in those areas though they constitute almost half of the population of the nation. In the current Malaysian parliament, women's representation does not exceed 15%.<sup>cxxiii</sup> There is only one female minister out of 28 ministers and there are seven female deputy ministers out of 40 deputy ministers in the present Malaysian Cabinet.<sup>cxxiv</sup>

The barriers leading to the under-representation of women in decision-making and power-sharing positions are regarded by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community

Development as cultural and institutional. Other factors are gender roles and ethnicity, political culture, limited platform for women in political parties, lack of critical mass, and gender-blind elements in recruitment and promotion.<sup>cxxv</sup> The notion that the role of women should be limited to the domestic sphere, or, that even if women have careers, they are fully and solely responsible for the welfare of the home and family, marks the starting point of inequalities at the societal level. Consequently, women have little opportunity to develop their leadership and decision-making skills in the public domain.<sup>cxxvi</sup> This was confirmed by the then Deputy Minister of Malaysia, Najib Tun Razak, as he stated :

I think we are seeing a new breed of women politicians who are very competent and who can make a success of any portfolio or responsibility. It is a reflection of the way we treat women in this country. It won't surprise me if there are more women in the future holding very important and senior posts. But in politics, not just any woman will succeed. There are two elements to consider if women were to ask for more representation. The first is to have the right woman and secondly, she has to be an appropriate candidate.<sup>cxxvii</sup>

With stereotyping the domestic role of women, even though women have been empowered educationally and constitute nearly half the members of the political parties in the country, and even emerge as active voters in elections, the number of women in the public decision-making bodies, such as parliament, remains minimal. Although there are demands made from women from various sections to increase the number of women to reach 30% of the composition in a decision-making body,<sup>cxxviii</sup> until the present time no visible plan has been announced by the government to increase the representation of women in the said bodies, except in the corporate sector, which aims to be fulfilled by 2016.<sup>cxxix</sup>

## Conclusion

Before the colonial period, women were confined to the domestic sphere. Some of the Malay women from the ruling class were involved indirectly as well as directly in politics but as an instrument to strengthen the position of power of their husbands. The average Malay, Chinese and Indian woman was only involved in the private sphere, with a varying degree of mobility outside of their homes, and was still subordinate to man. This phenomenon has been shaped by the elements of the culture and religion in the respective ethnic groups.

Despite the hindrances, education has contributed to the engagement of women in politics and the public domain as a whole. The involvement of women in the public sphere started with welfare and was non-political in nature. The early involvement of women in politics was through the non-governmental organizations with various interests, and was mainly concerned with the well-being and welfare of the women and female children.

The Japanese occupation marked the more active engagement of women in the public sphere as they were forced to work because of impoverished living conditions. The communal feeling was also visible as the treatment of the Japanese of the respective ethnic groups was different. The active involvement of women in politics was also reinforced by the educational empowerment they acquired, particularly abroad. They were able to see the cruel treatment by the colonials against the locals and witnessed the bravery of the freedom fighters. The awareness of fighting for better women's rights and empowerment also blended well in the era of fighting for independence. The brief period of the British after the Japanese occupation had precipitated the involvement of the Malay women in politics when they, together with men, objected to the Malayan Union proposal. The Indian women arose to liberate India and the Chinese women were introduced to the new concept of "Chineseness," formulated by Dr Sun Yat-sen. The rise of nationalism brought political awareness to the women who simultaneously actively engaged in politics. This period also marked an active and direct involvement of women in politics when they had their own women's wing in the respective political parties.

The post-independence era marked a remarkable improvement of women in almost all sectors, and, in fact, women were recognized as an important force in national development. Various policies and plans were created in order to facilitate and boost women's interests nationally. In spite of these efforts, women made less progress in the political participation, particularly at the public decision-making level. In this article, several factors have been identified as contributing to this gender gap, the major one being the stereotyping of the role of women.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Abdul Rashid Moten, "Society, Politics and Islam : An Overview," in *Government and Politics in Malaysia*, edited by Abdul Rashid Moten (Singapore : Cengage Learning, 2008), 5.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Population and Housing Census," <<http://www.statistics.gov.my>> (accessed 20 May, 2013).
  - <sup>iii</sup> See Appendix I.
  - <sup>iv</sup> Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya* (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1948), 150.
  - <sup>v</sup> Virginia H. Dancz, *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore : Oxford University Press, 1987), 4-8.
  - <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
  - <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
  - <sup>viii</sup> Jamilah Ariffin, *Women & Development in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya : Pelanduk Publications, 1992), 2.
  - <sup>ix</sup> Mahani Musa, *Sejarah & Socioekonomi Wanita Melayu Kedah 1881-1940* (Bangi : Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2005), 34.
  - <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.* Also see Barbara Watson Andaya, "Delineating Female Space. Seclusion and the State in Pre-Modern Island Southeast Asia", in *Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia and Other Pasts*, edited by Barbara Watson Andaya (Honolulu :

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- Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 250.
- <sup>xi</sup> Khoo Kay Kim, "Tradition and modernity in Malay society (1830s-1930s)," *Intellectual Discourse*, vol.19, no.1 (2011) : 21.
- <sup>xii</sup> One of the famous princesses these authors examined was Cik Siti Wan Kembang, the 6<sup>th</sup> ruler and the 1<sup>st</sup> female ruler of Kelantan. Inherited the throne in 1610, she had made Kelantan an international trade centre due to the open policy and its strategic location. She emphasized the development of the country, promoted education for women and created a healthy environment in the country to the extent that social problems were very minimal. She also strengthened the national defence. Another Malay princess was Sri Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah, from Aceh; the land was known for many conflicts in politics and its social and commerce were even hard to handle by men. The land became peaceful when ruled in 1641-1675. See Nisriwani Yahya and Syed Zulfilda S.M.Noor, *101 Puteri Dunia Melayu Sejarah dan Legenda* (Kuala Lumpur : Jabatan Muzium dan Antikuiti, 2003), 4-7, 70-75.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Virginia H. Dancz, *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, 43-44.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, 44.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Lai Ah Eng, "Peasants, Proletarians and Prostitutes. A Preliminary Investigation into the Work of Chinese Women in Colonial Malaya", *Research Notes and Discussion Paper*, No.59 (Singapore : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, (1986) : 14.
- <sup>xvii</sup> "Women and the Hindu Tradition" in *Encyclopedia of Women and Development*, edited by Raj Kumar (New Delhi : Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2000), vol.10, 47.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Virginia H. Dancz, *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, 66.
- <sup>xix</sup> Raja Rohana Raja Mamat, *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia Social and Legal Perspectives*, (Kuala Lumpur : Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991), 2.
- <sup>xx</sup> Raja Rohana Raja Mamat, *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia Social and Legal Perspective* , 50.
- <sup>xxi</sup> "Women and the Hindu Tradition", in *Encyclopedia on women...*, 43.
- <sup>xxii</sup> "Confucianism : Gender and sexuality",  
<<http://www.pathoes.com/Library/Confucianism/Ethics-Morality-Community/Gender-and-Sex>> (accessed 22 June 2011).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> M.Thambirajah. *Malaysia Dalam Sejarah 2*, (Kuala Lumpur : Federal Publications, 1987), 3.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid*, 4.
- <sup>xxv</sup> M.Thambirajah. *Malaysia Dalam Sejarah 3* (Kuala Lumpur : Federal Publications,1987), 1.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> For further details please see Virginia H. Dancz, *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore : Oxford University Press, 1987).
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Makmor Tumin, *Wanita di Malaysia : Perjuangan Menuntut Hak* (Kuala Lumpur : Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2006), 3.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Khoo Kay Kim (July 1993). Malaysian Women's Participation in Politics : A Historical Perspective. Paper presented at Seminar on Creating Political Awareness Among Malaysian Women organized by the Asian Institute for Development Communication, Kuala Lumpur.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Raja Rohana Raja Mamat, *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia Social and Legal Perspectives*, 6.

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- xxx Makmor Tumin, *Wanita di Malaysia. Perjuangan Menuntut Hak*, 3-5.
- xxxi Ibid., 6.
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