

Voice, Visibility and Influence

Towards Mapping Media Agents of Change
for Gender Equality in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's media has had a long history of having their voices stifled, most notably through the use of repressive laws, control of printing licenses and media ownership. While the digital revolution has made the existence and proliferation of alternative media possible, the online space mirrors the offline patriarchal culture either in the gender stereotypical portrayal of women and gender diversity, including women's sexuality, or in the portrayal and commodification of the "ideal" woman.

UNESCO's "Media and Gender: A Scholarly Agenda for the Global Alliance on Media and Gender" states that:

Historically, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge that gender is a determinant in the exercise of rights and freedoms internationally. Yet, profound gender imbalances in media content and decision-making systems documented by decades of research show that women's freedom of expression is severely limited by layers of structural, economic and cultural constraints. . . . research and political debate have broadened the conventional definition of freedom of expression as a gender-neutral concept to include an understanding of the role of gender inequalities and discrimination in hindering enjoyment of freedom of expression. For example, in 2010 the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression cited "discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression" as one of the ten key challenges to freedom of expression, noting that women and other historically marginalised groups "struggle to have their voices heard and to access information of relevance to them" (LaRue, Haraszti, Botero and Tlakula, 2010, cited in UNESCO, 2014: 12–13).

It is therefore unsurprising that much like traditional media, online media often have little to no presence of a female voice or standpoint, much less so a feminist one. In addition, the

integration of social media and journalistic practice has aggravated the harassment, violence and hate against women, especially when the issues reported are deemed controversial (e.g. child marriage, the human rights of LGBT people, female genital mutilation, polygamy, de hijabbing) and reported or shared by women. With the successful change in government in the last general election in May 2018 after 60 years of being ruled by the same political dominant parties, comes a cautious optimism on the part of civil society and the wider Malaysian society about the representation of gender equality in media.

One example which explains this cautious optimism is in relation to the Women's March held in Kuala Lumpur on 9th March 2019. Two news media, namely *Utusan Malaysia* and *Sinar Harian* had disproportionately focused their reporting on the presence of the LGBT persons by using negative words in their headlines and claiming that it was culturally inappropriate to raise the issue of fundamental human rights for the LGBT-identifying community, even if the rights raised related to the right to be free from all forms of violence and the right to equal pay for work of equal value. The news reports had led to a slew of online violence against the LGBT community and the organisers of the Kuala Lumpur Women's March. These, ranged from broad-based rejection and opposition to the rights of LGBT persons, to death threats and mobilisation of persons to lodge police reports. Such bias and prejudiced reporting by media has the deliberate effect of maintaining and perpetrating social and cultural norms underpinning gender inequalities in the country.

The lack of diversity and gender sensitisation in media content correlates to the structural gender inequality within the media industry. In a research conducted by the International Federation of Journalists titled "Media and Gender in Malaysia" (2015),¹ it was found that Malaysia's media companies are largely governed by men, where most editors and media owners are male, with women more likely to be in mid-level management rather than in top management. In addition, anecdotal evidence shows that male journalists who speak up against sexism and gender inequalities are attacked online for their views. What this points to is an acceptance of sexism as the standard, and a culture of intolerance towards content and information that promotes gender equality.

¹ See <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/the-asia-pacific-media-through-a-gender-lens.html>.

While there are current efforts by civil society to push for law reforms related to the regulation of media, the progress towards media gender parity and having a critical gender perspective has been very slow or close to no advancement. Every now and then, Malaysian media continues to be haunted by headlines such as “Beauty with Brains” (Tan, 2019), “Woman in a Man’s World” (Free Malaysia Today, 2011; TOC Automotive College, 2010) and “Woman On Top” (Azizul, 2019). More often than not, women are scrutinised for their appearance rather than for their capabilities. Reports on women politicians contesting as Members of Parliament in the 2018 general elections, for example, gave undue focus to their physical appearance instead of their capabilities. The same approach was not applied to their male counter-parts. Women are not even granted their names when media reports on their international achievements, such as what happened to Prof. Dr. Serena Nik-Zainal, who was identified as “M’sian scientist wins Dr Josef Steiner prize for cancer research” (Cheah, 2019) or as “Cambridge-based Malaysian wins 'Nobel Prize for Cancer Research” (Tee, 2019).² Similarly for Amber Leong. She was described as, “First-ever Malaysian to score deal on Shark Tank grew up poor, nearly died, and then built a US\$7.5 million company” (Smith, 2019). While few women in sports do get their names acknowledged in the headlines, like Farah Ann Hadi, Malaysia’s gymnast (who received critical and embarrassing comments about her gymnast attire despite winning a gold medal at the SEA Games in 2015),³ or Nicol David, Malaysia’s renown squash player, or Malaysia’s divers, Pandelega Rinong and Leong Mun Yee, these dominant patterns of not naming women in the headlines despite their achievements suggest that when women make these significant international achievements, they are seen as “Malaysian first”, then “women” for making it big internationally or worse, for making it big “in a man’s world”, and only after these types of headlines do their names appear in the accompanying texts.

² The researchers acknowledge that this has happened to men as well but to a much lesser extent, and appears to be an issue of social class, affecting men who are deemed “ordinary”. See <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/09/26/malaysian-teacher-wins-prize-at-world-robotics-championship>.

³ See <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2015/06/12/malaysian-gymnast-gets-brickbats-for-showing-aurat-vagina-shape-despite-win/914419>.

There is some indication that media's representation of gender and gender equality issues could improve. Prior to this research, in the absence of a full-fledge diversity in the media landscape, we saw glimpses of efforts and campaigns to diversify women's representation in the media, even within the current media landscape. These include individual women in media companies (e.g. Feminist Fridays of BFM89.9), independent internet-based platforms (e.g. the G-Blog, Ilmu Seks, Wait-A-Minute-Now, FEM Filter, Women:girls, HerChannel) and investigative journalism such as Star R.AGE that looks into social justice issues (e.g. child grooming and sexual harassment). This research attempted to do a more targeted mapping, not only of media agents of change for gender equality (existing and potential ones), but in understanding if the challenges, constraints and obstacles remain much the same as reported globally in numerous research including UNESCO's, or if they have changed, and if opportunities and facilitating factors have increased or expanded in "new Malaysia".

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Women in media” has been interrogated through research in many ways. Conventionally, it touches on the portrayal of women, women’s role and responsibilities, and the structural challenges faced by women journalists in media. As such, “voice”, “visibility” and “influence” of women can take many forms in media. However, little research can be found on how gender equality issues are portrayed in Malaysian media.

Around the world, women are far less likely than men to be seen or heard in mainstream media. As subjects of stories, women only appear in a quarter of television, radio, and print news. In a 2015 report, women made up a mere 19 per cent of experts featured in news stories and 37 per cent of reporters telling stories globally (Rattan, Chilazi, Georgeac and Bohnet, 2019). This shockingly was the same picture Wood painted in 1994, when Wood identified themes in a gendered media: underrepresentation of women in media; stereotypical portrayals of men and women in media; stereotypical images of relationships between men and women in media, particularly women’s dependence and men’s independence; men’s authority and women’s incompetence; women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners; women as victims and sex objects but men as aggressors; and normalising violence against women (Wood, 1994).

Other than the percentage of media coverage which speaks to women’s visibility, or more like the lack of it, Yoong (2018) who examined career advice texts and interviews with high-achieving women produced over a 12-month period in three print and broadcast media, that is, *Her World* (a Malaysian magazine); *Clove* (a Sunday pullout in a mainstream newspaper); and *Capital FM* (a commercial radio station), found that there were similarities and variances in the discourses and identities produced by the three media outlets which are directly related to the tensions and relations between wider sociocultural norms, media commodification, institutional roles, and women’s agency. She further identified how the radio has been relatively under-valued in gender and language research, and saw the potential it holds for disrupting established hegemonic discourses. This discovery is significant in the Malaysian media landscape, where the production of oppositional and alternative discourses is rare. Yoong’s analysis identifies a range of mutually reinforcing and oppositional professional

discourses that work together to articulate paradoxical female subjectivities that are empowered yet deficient, and strongly associated with stereotypical femininity and motherhood. In other words, media coverage of women, which no doubt gives women visibility, is stereotypically in service of the status quo, and “women’s empowerment” of this nature in effect depoliticises women’s work issues when covered by the media in such manner.

Yoong (2017) has also argued that acts of humour uphold gender hierarchies and inequalities in a few ways. Traditional stereotypical portrayals of women still prevail, and these characteristics are naturalised by appealing to assumed shared common sense. Although both sexes are mocked in some instances of humour, when analysing why men and women are ridiculed, it was found that the men were targeted for two conflicting reasons: for exhibiting stereotypical feminine characteristics and for attempting to produce a hegemonic masculine identity. On the other hand, women were mocked for embodying traits culturally ascribed to masculinity. It is concluded that this works to legitimate men’s social dominance over women (2017: 30).

The Malaysia country report by the International Federation of Journalists (2015) has also looked at the voice, visibility and influence of women journalists in the media sector, especially in terms of where women are in the media—how the majority are journalists, and too few are editors or owners of media, or in top management, and how their ideas, their voice, their opinions, and themselves as persons are treated and/or (under)valued. All of these issues, including that of sexual harassment and how women journalists are being used “to getting front page stories by going to speak to men in high positions who were known to be sleazy” (IFJ, 2015), are to some extent, adequately covered by this report. However, IFJ’s research report does not explore what these women journalists are interested in covering, and there appears to be a conflation between what men cover predominantly as the desired topics that women wish to cover. Women themselves may raise these issues as to why they may not necessarily seek opportunities to cover topics of gender inequality issues only because women journalists feel that they need to demonstrate too their versatility in covering a variety of issues in order to be “marketable” as journalists.

On a marginally better note, survey findings from the Institute of Journalists Malaysia, on the salary range of journalists in media, show that female journalists earn slightly more than their male counterparts, at least in the English media, and certainly more than female journalists who work in other vernacular media.⁴ This may suggest that cultural and societal attitudes towards women in such media might be becoming more progressive, focusing on quality of the journalistic output, rather than gender. This may also be because of how it is the English media in Malaysia that has traditionally provided coverage to gender equality issues in Malaysia as can be seen by the positive visibility of women's rights groups and their statements or positions on gender equality issues in such media.⁵ However, in a country like Malaysia, where polarisation of issues and discourses can be markedly segregated along racial or religious lines, it is imperative to see how gender equality issues can be better mainstreamed through all media—print, motion, sound and digital.

Randhawa's (2018) interrogation of the voices of women in Malay media, even though it only covered the period of 1987 to 1998, can lend insights to how women are able to navigate structural and socio-political issues within media. Randhawa asserts that "gendered newsroom practices in an authoritarian state paradoxically allowed marginalised women's page journalists greater political and editorial freedom than their malestream colleagues". This was largely because the women's pages were perceived as an apolitical space, and because of this perception, rightly or wrongly, women journalists were able to engage in investigative journalism and discuss issues that were considered outside the realm of male-dominated party politics. It also helps to note that women page journalists perceived their role differently from malestream journalists, defining their role in terms of the reader, rather than the government. Role and responsibilities of women journalists, and journalists in general, certainly surfaced in this research as well. Randhawa's thesis suggests an ability of women's page journalists at the time to navigate obstacles that were placed to curb their writing. These women's page journalists were more likely to report censorship than their malestream colleagues who wrote about politics and economics. These women's page

⁴ See <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/10/05/survey-local-english-media-female-journalists-take-home-the-most-pay/1679793>.

⁵ A more exhaustive research to examine coverage of gender equality issues in Chinese and Malay media to draw a more determinate conclusion would be needed. For example, the Chinese media are known to give more positive coverage to sexual orientation and gender identity issues but not on a frequent basis.

journalists also drew upon multiple resources, including constructs of professionalism, Islamic values and reader loyalty to support their attempts to engage in stories that the mainstream hierarchy opposed. While these women's page journalists supported the ruling coalition, because the editorial hierarchy, like the political hierarchy, positioned women outside party political contests, women journalists writing for the women's pages could write stories that advocated a greater public role for women. However, this freedom was still very much contingent upon the external political environment. Randhawa's thesis suggests that media coverage of gender equality issues in media was just as much dependent on women journalists themselves, the "freedoms" extended to them, and how vested they are in navigating the obstacles and facing the challenges of writing on gender equality issues, and not only dependent on the decision-making power of editors and the media owners.

Media agents of change are defined here by three criteria: voice, visibility and influence. The research pays attention to women or men as media agents of change who have demonstrated through these three criteria that media can better reflect gender equality as a fundamental human right.⁶ In interviewing the identified research respondents or interviewees whom we are consciously referring to as “knowledge and experience holders”, the research expected that this will mean that these media agents of change, women or men, have better enabled:

- a) a diversity of voices based on gender, including voices of women in media;
- b) visibility of women in media
- c) and visibility of gender inequality issues, including increasing the visibility of women’s role/contributions to society and the marginalisation of the LGBTIQ community.

In addition, media agents of change are seen as people who have influenced media in relation to decision-making on coverage of issues, expanding space for the gender equality discourse (e.g. social media influencers) or helped advanced the discourse on an issue so that it influences policy and law-making (e.g. Star R.AGE).

The research, which was conducted from June to December 2019, initially sought to identify where the women media agents of change are compared to what was initially identified by the International Federation of Journalists’/UNESCO’s “Getting the Balance Right: Gender Equality in Journalism”. This is because the nature of journalism with the convergence of digital media has shifted tremendously since 2009, with more women opting to be part-time journalists, citizen journalists or activist journalists and yet have no influence over structural policies and decision-making in media. The idea was that a closer examination of where women media agents of change are and how they are influencing media and media content for gender equality compared to where women tend to be located traditionally in media was expected to provide useful insights. However, in the course of conducting the research, it was

⁶ See White, Aidan. 2009. *Getting the Balance Right: Gender Equality in Journalism*. Brussels, Belgium: International Federation of Journalists. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000180707>. Accessed on 9 May 2019.

felt that merely identifying media agents of change may not surface the challenges and facilitating factors in media, which could have changed as a result of a higher consciousness of civil and political rights among Malaysians, especially after the 14th General Election, and the converging issues of sustainability and survival as in the crisis of unpaid staff salaries faced by Utusan Malaysia since August 2019.⁷ The research, therefore, expanded to include media agents of change who demonstrated potential to cover gender equality issues with a fairer or more critical lens.

In consultation with the Institute of Journalists Malaysia, desk research was done to identify the media agents of change who have tried to and advanced the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media, including over social media. It was agreed, that the best way to get responses was to develop a set of questions that acted more as guidelines for the interview rather than a questionnaire. These questions were developed by referring to the key concerns and themes raised in UNESCO's Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media, and UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy for Gender Equality Framework.

A total of 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with identified media actors (traditional, digital and social media) who are involved in pushing for gender equality in media (content and institutionally), or who have shown some interest "to bring about social change" even if not in gender equality issues. The knowledge and experience holders are both independent or affiliated to organisations.

Using a participatory workshop approach, the consultation and knowledge-sharing workshop with media actors on 9 November 2019 used preliminary findings from the research and acted as a focus group discussion as well, designed to triangulate the research findings and to identify next steps in evidence-based advocacy. It also confirmed media agents of change

⁷ See, for example, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/176697>; also <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/10/532396/utusan-ordered-pay-staffs-sept-oct-salaries-and-vss-money>.

already identified by this research, and surfaced new names/identities/handles during the mapping.⁸

Research Questions

The research sought to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Where and what are the efforts that have pushed for and advanced the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media?
2. What are the challenges in pushing for and advancing positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media?
3. What are the facilitating factors that help advance the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media?
4. What are the lessons learnt in pushing for and advancing the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media? What are the implications for the gender sensitisation of media?

The research questions were further refined or adapted during the conduct of the in-depth interviews due to the diverse range of actors identified—academics, activists, journalists, and social media influencers. While the research started out with a deductive approach in how the research questions were shaped, the data analysis lent to an inductive perspective, but one that paid greater attention to the insights of the knowledge and experience holders,

⁸ These names/identities/handles are now a resource for a network of activists who work with media and are gender equality advocates. These are kept confidential in order to help ensure that those identified are not deliberately targeted with online gender-based violence or similar forms of attacks by those against the promotion and realisation of gender equality in Malaysia.

because the main idea was to point to workable possibilities of how existing media agents of change for gender equality in Malaysia could further advance the discourse on gender and related issues.

Data Analysis

While data analysis centred on a deductive approach, that is, focusing on how knowledge and experience holders were speaking to the research questions, this research sought to keep at the forefront of what Ros Atkins did, who, after more than 20 years as a journalist, found himself stuck in a constant state of trying:

My colleagues and I accepted that representing women equally in our journalism was a desirable goal, but we had also accepted that it wasn't possible. Year after year, we were making an effort while not making anywhere near the progress we desired. Shifting out of the sense that "things should be different" to asking "what can I do differently" is key (Rattan, Chilazi, Georgeac and Bohnet, 2019).

In analysing the research data, and given the constraints of media and journalists, this research also started to ask what can be done and what could be possible in ensuring adequate and regular media coverage on gender issues, including a gender perspective on issues not typically considered gender issues. Data analysis was also further informed by the work of Randhawa (2018) as earlier elaborated in the literature review. Data analysis was therefore not designed to draw general consensus of what knowledge and experience holders were saying, but focused a lot more on harnessing insights, experiences and the voices of these media agents of change (potential and existing).

Research Limitations

The research is only the first phase of what is envisaged as a larger project. This first phase sets the necessary groundwork and evidence collection for policy advocacy. It was therefore thought important to start with what can be identifiable as good practices/initiatives in

advancing the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media. Also included were media actors that had yet to do this but who were part of more progressive media institutions, or who were associated with women’s rights groups and/or human rights groups. In terms of the third criteria of influence, the research was unable to interrogate in full the institutional structures of media and the full range of responses from audiences, as the research uses the identified media agents of change as its entry point of interrogation, and their perception of their influence, but triangulated with other sources.

Profile of Knowledge and Experience Holders

A total of 28 knowledge and experience holders were interviewed. 22 identified as cisgender females, 5 identified as cisgender males and one identified as a transgender female person. Among the cisgender female knowledge and experience holders, one was a person with disabilities.

Reference	Gender	Age	Sector	Self-identified Social Media Influencer
Anonymous, 14 October 2019	Cisgender Female	35	Media-Online	No
Anonymous, 21 October 2019	Cisgender Female	32	Media-Online	No
Daphne Iking, 4 November 2019	Cisgender Female	41	Independent-Social Media	Yes
Hariati Azizan, 14 October 2019	Cisgender Female	48	Media-Print/Online	No
Holly Foong, 3 November 2019	Cisgender Female	27	Media-Broadcast	No

Reference	Gender	Age	Sector	Self-identified Social Media Influencer
Jaskirath Kaur Sohanpal, 25 October 2019	Cisgender Female	32	Activist-Social Media	Yes, in terms of receiving DMs because people can relate.
Jasmine, 28 October 2019	Cisgender Female	25	Media-Online	No
Lim Ann Gee, 26 October 2019	Cisgender Female	26	Media- Print/Online	No
Majidah Hashim, 25 October 2019	Cisgender Female	39	Activist-Online, Social Media	Would like to be, don't know if she is there yet. Posts can be hit or miss.
Michel Chng, 3 November 2019	Cisgender Female	27	Media-Print/Online	No
Marsya, 23 October 2019	Cisgender Female	21	Independent-Social Media	No
Melisa Melina Idris, 14 October 2019	Cisgender Female	37	Media- Broadcast	No
Melissa Mohd Akhir, 25 October 2019	Cisgender Female	41	Activist-Social Media	No

Reference	Gender	Age	Sector	Self-identified Social Media Influencer
Michelle Yesudas, 12 October 2019	Cisgender Female	37	Activist-Social Media	No
Nalisa Amin, 23 October 2019	Cisgender Female	30	Independent-Social Media	Yes
Ng Xiang Yi, 28 October 2019	Cisgender Female	27	Media-Online	No
Nurainie Haziqah Shafii, 4 October 2019	Cisgender Female	29	Politics-Print, Online, Social Media	Yes
S. Indramalar, 14 October 2019	Cisgender Female	47	Media-Print/Online	No
Serence, 17 October 2019	Cisgender Female	28	Media-Broadcast	No
Sharifah Syahirah, 24 October 2019	Cisgender Female	42	Academic-Social Media	Maybe at a smaller scale, politics and gender issues
Siti Kasim, 24 October 2019	Cisgender Female	56	Legal, activist-Print, Social Media	Don't think so, but others say so and media also picks up her posts.

Reference	Gender	Age	Sector	Self-identified Social Media Influencer
Syerleena Abdul Rashid, 12 October 2019	Cisgender Female	39	Politics-Online, Social Media	No
Anonymous, 26 October 2019	Cisgender Male	31	Academic-Social Media	Yes
Mohd Tajuddin Mohd Rasdi, 27 September 2019	Cisgender Male	57	Academic-Print, Online	No
Syed Azmi Alhabshi, 21 October 2019	Cisgender Male	43	Activist-Social Media	Yes
YRC, 25 October 2019	Cisgender Male	32	Activist-Social Media	Not particularly, but on specific issues, yes.
Zurairi AR, 29 October 2019	Cisgender Male	35	Media-Online, Social Media	No
Maya Sarin, 21 October 2019	Transgender	36	Independent - Social Media	No

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings are presented under the three key aspects of voice, visibility and influence. For each topic, both challenges and what could help improve the media coverage of gender equality issues are discussed together, to allow for a better contextualisation. A number of the research findings point to the need for ongoing public education and awareness-raising on gender equality issues, and the need for media to play its role of serving the public, rather than the government or private interests.

VOICE

Active Claiming of Space to Speak

Knowledge and experience holders have demonstrated that women and men (cisgender and transgender alike) need to be both proactive and remain active in claiming the space to speak to advance gender equality issues. Key actors have written columns and continue to write on various platforms, self or group-initiated websites and over social media. Others seek to publish their views through press statements, and admittedly, media sometimes would pick these up because of the sensationalistic element either within the statements or in the expectations of sensationalism that the statements would cause.

Lack of Interest of Women Media Journalists in Writing About/Highlighting Gender Equality Issues

Interest of media journalists is becoming a key factor on whether gender equality issues remain in the public eye. Media journalists who want to write about human rights issues, for e.g. like rights of migrant workers or refugees, or about freedom of opinion and expression issues, or about economics, are usually unable to pinpoint gender issues as a key angle. This may also be because those interviewed fail to see the gender perspective or fail to highlight it. While women media journalists who cover politics in Malaysia are very aware of the issues of women's political participation, there appears to be a low interest in pursuing special stories about women politicians in Malaysia, especially those who are in decision-making positions as Members of Parliament, as Ministers or Deputy Ministers, and as State

Assemblypersons. Yet, pursuant from the 14th General Election, more women are elected representatives and hold key portfolios in government.

The Ideal Voice

With the rise of Islamic supremacism and extremism, which women get to speak on issues, including gender equality issues, has to fit the *ideal* Muslim woman image. Perception of what is the ideal woman suggests that it cannot fall outside existing prejudices, stereotypes and biases, and this can be tricky, such as how women with disabilities, despite wearing the hijab, are seen as vain if they talk about fashion. Someone like Maryam Lee, in particular, is a person whom netizens appear to love to hate. Both she and Sajat⁹ have been subjected to investigations by the Islamic religious authorities.

Even when women gain acknowledgement and recognition for their capabilities, as long as they express something that does not reflect the status quo, even among their own social networks, they can receive the brunt of excessive personal attacks or attacks on their views (e.g. Dr. Nur Amalina Che Bakri on vaping, and Maryam Lee and Emma Maembong on taking off their hijabs).

In the light of this social expectation of the ideal voice, while institutional credibility does lend some protection—a buffer of authority—to voice out views that are based on facts, there is still a need to navigate carefully, and identification as feminists also remains an identifier that cannot be so openly announced or acknowledged without expecting and being ready for some form of backlash.

Growing Lack of Empathy for Others and a Bankruptcy of Basic Humanity

The imposed social requirement to fit a specific and very rigid mould of validity has translated to a significant lack of empathy or compassion for those who do not fit this mould, even if they are accomplished in key areas in their lives. For example, Sajat, a successful entrepreneur who has been at the centre of a controversial investigation by the Department for Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) into her sexual organs/genitals but who is well-known in

⁹ Sajat was investigated for suspicion that she is a transgender woman.

plantations across Malaysia, is considered entertainment fodder for some netizens on social media, rather than a real human being. So even when her child was taken away from her by the authorities, people would poke fun of her and call her a man.

VISIBILITY

Media Coverage of Gender Issues Remain Largely Stereotypical and Centred on Violence

Similar to the global phenomenon, knowledge and experience holders have said that coverage of gender issues or gender equality issues in Malaysian media—print, broadcast or online (which can be relatively different from what is discussed over social media)—is just too minimal and far between. In fact, the coverage has been described as “seasonal”, and impact is thought to only take place when gender equality issues are made into a special feature. Gender issues are just not a hot topic, not sensational enough to be a regular “feature”, unlike what happens in the arena of Malaysian politics. Yet, even when an issue becomes sensational like the child marriage of the 11-year-old to a 41-year-old-man in Kelantan, hardly any follow up on the case/situation is done. Similarly, with the public caning of the alleged two lesbians in the Terengganu sharia court and the absence of legal representation for them.

Gender equality issues, if covered, are usually centred on domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexism and violence, in particular sexual violence. These tend to be sufficiently sensational to warrant space in media, and yet, when these are covered, it is the women’s rights groups who push for a gender analytical lens, like in the case of the single mother who had to prostitute herself because her ex-husband failed to pay alimony, and was caned at the Terengganu sharia court.

Unfortunately, moral policing issues are not seen as sensational enough and the absence of violence, sexual or otherwise, render these issues of much lesser priority. Sometimes, even when there are male Malay Muslim progressive voices who could speak against the moral policing of women’s bodies, they do not. One of the reasons is possibly because that moral policing issues are not considered national issues or its implications on governance, political integrity and democracy are not easily identifiable. It may also be because some consider that these issues should be managed at the personal level. However, women’s rights groups

consistently put out statements against such moral policing and yet, there has been no take up of these issues as public-interest issues. It is good, at this point, to refer to the reminder from International Federation of Journalists who say that:

Gender inequality is not an individual or societal problem; it's a national problem. It needs to be highlighted constantly by the media and led by the media so that change can take place within the media industry first and eventually, through a domino-effect, in the other industries too (IFJ, 2015: 30).

It is in this light of what is seen as media's role, that media can in fact set the narrative for a healthier discourse, while still retaining its "neutral" professionalism on the issue. This can be done by covering the diversity of perspectives on the said issue, such as how it did on the 50th anniversary of the interracial tragedy of 13 May 1969, and decriminalisation of drugs. However, media like Malaysiakini, has been able to take very clear stands on some human rights issues and its biased position is defended in these cases. For reasons unknown, progressive media in Malaysia still do not quite shine in providing coverage on gender inequality issues, and may point to how the appreciation for gender equality while existent among some media owners and editors, it is not actively cultivated as a culture within the organisation through training or policy.

Limited Translation of Political Consciousness to Gender Equality Issues

Media actors in Malaysia in general are aware of the implications when media ownership is associated with political affiliations or when media convergence means a resulting oligopoly of media. This consciousness then translates to efforts to establish alternative-owned media or to consciously join such media. For example, Oriental Daily is owned by KTS Group, a Sarawak timber company founded by the late Lau Hui Kang, and was described as a media agency that operates on a relatively flat structure, that is, not as many bureaucratic decision-making levels as that of the larger, traditional media news agencies in Malaysia, such as Sin Chew Jit Poh and Nanyang Siang Pau. The Nut Graph (ceased), Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insider (ceased) are other prime examples of the importance of having media that is "owned by others".

This consciousness of power and how power is manipulative unfortunately does not translate as well to why media should place importance in covering gender equality issues. In more progressive media agencies and among progressive individual media actors, gender consciousness of getting voices of women's experts is part of the practice, but not of policy. There were no reasons why it could not be made into a policy or at least a more conscious practice, rather than a practice that is dependent on how woke a journalist or editor is. Often times, deadlines are cited as to the reason why journalists are just unable to meet the ideal. Yet, journalists are often reminded that they *must* get views from different ethnicities on issues especially if these issues can affect political or racial sensitivities, and deadlines are sometimes extended because of the possible fallout of not presenting a diversity of voices based on ethnicity. The same allowance is not extended to getting women's or gender perspectives.

Possibility of Sustainability and Survival Issues of Media to Lead to Cultural and Organisational Change

A number of knowledge and experience holders have expressed how media's toxic lens is still 100 per cent in favour of sensationalism, clickbait-type headlines and/or news, and garnering more readership. Media has shown though that they can change or are forced to change if survival and sustainability issues take centre stage. While one media agency has resorted to highlighting porn stars to gain more readership and so, to be appealing to advertisers with their increased/growing readership, another has taken a more progressive and inclusive approach. *Malaysiakini*, for example, already known for its very visible support for civil and political rights issues, especially the dynamics of Malaysian politics, has about a month ago (in October 2019), further incentivised journalists to pursue their own ideas for a story and tracks this as a key performance indicator (KPI), thus translating what was a general encouragement into policy. The institutionalisation of this good practice may also be partly due to the push factor that *Malaysiakini* no longer holds the edge in getting the views of past opposition politicians. All media now has access to these politicians since they are now in government. *Utusan Malaysia* is in a difficult circumstance, but it has also been encouraged to cover alternative views, and not only mainstream, right-wing Islamist or Malay-Muslim views. This was evident in how *Utusan Malaysia* published an article by Prof Mohd Tajuddin

Mohd Rasdi which touched on the violence and discrimination faced by the LGBT among other issues, which the media agency knew would be extremely controversial a topic for its readers. The article was reportedly published without any form of censorship.

Foreign-Press Dependent Prominence

Winning awards or gaining international recognition brings prominence to women and transgender human rights activists. This prominence and visibility is then further buoyed by foreign press rather than local Malaysian media, but gets picked up by local Malaysian media as part of the “seasonal” media coverage on gender equality issues. A prime example is transgender activist, Nisha Ayub, who won an award and international recognition from the BBC: the 2016 U.S. International Women of Courage Award, and *BBC*’s annual list of 100 most inspiring and influential women.

INFLUENCE

Newsworthiness Retains a Traditional Lens

What is news retains a traditional understanding despite how vastly the modern media landscape has changed. Media is still chasing readers as audiences, and hardly any journalists are in a position to monitor comments/feedback, to engage in discourse. Media has also not placed any emphasis when covering gender equality issues, to write on the root causes of the issue, rather than only focus on the issue at the superficial level. For example, the media coverage around child marriage only focuses on the sensational aspects of the case of the 11-year-old marrying the 41-year-old man, not on the follow up or the damaging outcomes of child marriage. The same can be seen with coverage on domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment issues. This has also meant that media, especially vernacular media, has remained polarised, catering to “audiences’ interests” or “perceived audiences’ interests” that have been identified and unchanged throughout the years. For example, for the Chinese community, it is about business, racist politics, and education as well as the developments in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Interest in gender issues are almost non-existent for this community or more likely perceived as such, and there is a tension between some gender issues like women’s decision-making positions in companies, gender wage gaps, minimum wage issues, and maternity and paternity leaves, because of how the Chinese community are

also largely employers. For the Malay community, it is Malay politics, government policies, government aid, costs of living, lives of celebrities/high profile persons, and Malay rights.

Lack of Social Significance of the Capabilities of Women Politicians

When women in politics accomplish something, it is seen as “part of their job” and nothing out of the ordinary. Anonymous (interview, 26 October 2019) made a similar observation as Yoong (2017) and identified how when women in decision-making such as women Members of Parliament address gender equality issues, this is merely seen as part and parcel of their work, and in this way, their achievements for advancing gender equality are depoliticised. However, when certain male politicians touch on gender issues, and because it is not seen as part of their main responsibilities even though they are supposed to be concerned on all issues that affect Malaysians, including gender equality issues, these men (like the current Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed, and Syed Saddiq, Minister of Youth and Sports) are perceived as extraordinary or exemplary.

EMERGING GENDER INDICATORS

Traditional gender indicators in media, which have long been discussed and put forward in various policy arenas are still very much relevant today. Some of these that were raised were:

- Equality and representation in decision-making positions in media
- The gaze of women’s bodies (“good” or bad) and sexualisation/objectification
- Gender sensitisation training, which should include **gender-sensitised framing for gender-based violence reporting**
- **Use of gender-inclusive language**

These remain very much relevant despite the many researches on gender and media, and the heightened awareness of gender equality and human rights globally. In addition to these, however, there is a need for gender indicators that can build up the critical lens of media, and the following gender indicators emerged which spoke to what could be observed, both quantitatively or qualitatively, that resulted in positive and negative impacts.

Self-Censorship in Media on Gender Issues

Self-censorship in media by both journalists who seek to cover gender equality issues more actively, especially those who are interested in highlighting LGBTIQ issues, and those on social media who speak on gender equality issues. Media journalists have to self-censor because they do not want to be seen as only interested in covering one type of issue, even if there is a big gap in media coverage. It also affects their perceived professionalism and marketability of skills. Gender equality advocates on social media, on the other hand have to self-censor their feminist ideologies, or their rage because of the resulting injustices, always mindful that bystanders will be influenced negatively by any aggression on their part.

Interest of Media Journalists in Writing about Gender Equality Issues

The current lack of interest suggest that gender equality advocates and allies need to think about how else to inculcate a gender analytical lens with media journalists, how to make gender equality issues “hot and sexy”, short of having feminists become media journalists themselves, just as how women (not necessarily feminists) are encouraged to enter politics. The fact that media journalists in Malaysian media are largely female makes media a potentially strong ally. Furthermore, more and more knowledge and experience holders who are active over social media or who work in media are in their 20s and 30s. This means that there is a potential to bring about structural change if they can be supported to cultivate a gender analytical lens on issues. This could also mean that civil society organisations and academics need to be better able to unpack existing issues to provide this gender analytical lens thereby educating both journalists and the public.

Growth of Number of Media Sources with a Gender Analytical Lens

The growth or increase in number of media sources with a gender analytical lens would help media journalists get the views that have a gender perspective or analysis. So it is not merely identifying women as experts or opinion leaders, but women and men (cisgender and transgender alike) who can provide a gender analytical lens on the issues, including issue or content-based social media accounts and websites.

Extent of Networking with Gender Equality Advocates by Media Journalists

A number of younger media journalists, especially those in the vernacular media, have weaker relationships with gender equality advocates. They are not seen as key influencers structurally

within media, and so are often “ignored” or “unknown” by gender equality advocates. For this, especially in the case of Malaysia, a complementary gender indicator would be: **Overlooked Media (and Actors) as Allies or Potential Allies for Amplification of Gender Equality Messaging.**

Overlooked Media (and Actors) as Allies or Potential Allies for Amplification of Gender Equality Messaging

Broadcast journalists, especially in vernacular media, have expressed that they are willing to cover press statements as well, especially those who work with the more traditional media but find that no press statements are sent to them from gender equality advocates. *Utusan Online* is also now more open to publishing articles that promote gender equality, and women’s rights issues.

Visibility of Non-Activist Male Allies

Visibility of non-activist type male allies speaking in favour of gender equality can mean that there is in reality a readership out there who are interested in gender equality issues, other than women. This helps break the stereotype too, and should suggest to media that gender equality issues are news and newsworthy.

Disempowered Feminist/Gender-Perspective Journalists (Impact of Sexual Harassment/Sexism and Hiring Practices)

Feminist and gender-sensitised journalists have shared how disempowering it can be to be in an environment where sexism and sexual harassment thrives without any form of redress. Feminist and gender-sensitised journalists sometimes find themselves afraid to speak up for fear of losing their jobs or for fear of finding things made difficult for them to do their job well, even if their immediate supervisors or bosses are supportive of them.

Cost-Cutting Measures with Gender Implications

Some factors that could work against women covering some issues includes not having women as part of the camera crew in most media agencies. This means that costs will go up especially for accommodation, and so women are often told not to go into the field for certain assignments.

Service to Whom: Government, Public or a Specific/Specialised Community

Who media is in service to came up as a topic with a number of knowledge and experience holders. More often than not, most Malaysian media are in service of their media owners or the political parties with whom they are associated. This has meant that public interest has also been shaped to follow these interests as if these interests are their own or are put across as public interests but in reality are interests of a few elites or the dominant group.

Topical and/or Tokenistic Discourse on Gender Equality Issues (Media Coverage of Women and Minorities Beyond Crimes and Sensationalism)

Media coverage on gender equality issues must be able to set the direction and framing of the discourse. When gender equality issues are merely treated as topical and coverage is tokenistic, i.e. designed to serve the interests of media (e.g. through sensationalism and clickbait tactics) rather than to set the narrative on gender equality for public interests, then these types of media coverages cannot even be counted as “covering gender”.

Existence of Feminist Editorial Policies

The nature of existing editorial policies in media could be examined to see how feminist and inclusive these are, and the obstacles that may exist to change practices or follow policy despite media having progressive editorial policies. Editorial policies should clearly be about serving public interests and playing an active role in, for example, reining in divisive statements that fuel misogyny, racism, moral policing of women and gender non-conforming persons, etc.

Access to a Publicity Platform and Sustainability of the Discourse

This relates to what kind of platforms do media provide to gender equality advocates and how consistent are these in ensuring that issues remain in the public eye. Other forms of media can also be examined, like popular blogs and websites (e.g. SAYS, Siakap Keli, World of Buzz, Oh Bulan) and social media influencers (e.g. Neelofa, Vivvy Yusof, Dr. Amalina, Sajat, Siti Awe, Bonda Umirah Taib, TikTok, CuriousCat, Humans of KL, etc.), and if these too provide a regular platform to gender equality issues.

Monetising Gender Equality

This is in relation to the tendencies and practices of adopting tactical clickbait and sensationalism strategies for sustainability of the media and to tell advertisers of their reach.

COSTS OF LACK OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES

Participants of the consultation and knowledge-sharing workshop¹⁰ which also acted as a focus group discussion were only able to identify three costs, and it may well be too because the nature of the research did not have a strong focus to unearth costs related to lack of media coverage, but costs of speaking out and visibility. The three identified were:

- a) Women's voices and expertise are not apparent and easily glossed over for the success of the concerned event.
- b) Increase in gender-based violence and discrimination, including sexual harassment due to the normalisation of the silence around these issues, and to an extent, an amplification of that silence and impunity in perpetuating these forms of violence and discrimination which has both direct and indirect costs to women and girls and those who do not conform to the gender binary.
- c) Increases actual costs and negative perception of costs associated in addressing gender inequalities at work and in the public, which in turn works against progressive policies that try to put into place, among others, equal wages for work of equal worth, or paternity leave, longer maternity leave and period (menstruation) leave. Yet, no one raised issues of actual costs or had negative perception of costs when pilgrimage leave for all religions when first mooted for Malaysians.

¹⁰ Who are equally acknowledged as knowledge and experience holders.

RESEARCH FINDINGS SUMMARY

The findings can be summarised based on the four research question mentioned earlier.

Where and what are the efforts that have pushed for and advanced the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media?

While progressive work conditions in media agencies may allow for greater representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media, it does not necessarily translate to adequate and professional coverage of gender inequality issues to advance the gender equality discourse and agenda. A lot of it still depends on what is perceived as news or newsworthy, and on the interests of the journalist. Furthermore, what is perceived as news or newsworthy is still seen through a traditional lens. For e.g. the advocacy against the levy of GST on sanitary pads and for menstrual leave has not been considered news or newsworthy. However, the news that girls do not go to school because they cannot afford to buy sanitary pads gets some news coverage because of its sensationalistic element. The role of media to educate the public on gender equality issues is very seldom on the table as a critical consideration. Similarly, media does not consider keeping gender equality issues in the public eye as part of its role.

It is also critical to not draw or make “false equivalence” in the data and developments that we may observe. For example, having women give their perspective on issues is meant to emphasise that women too have expertise in a range of issues, and that women too are capable in doing such analyses. However, it does not and should not be seen to immediately translate to providing a gender perspective to the concerned issues.

What are the challenges in pushing for and advancing positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media?

A direct affront to the status quo is usually not allowed or encouraged by media. The question appears to be for civil society actors, in particular, how best to make concessions and how to ascertain the costs to these compromises. While civil society continues to navigate these constraints, media too should recognise and acknowledge at how the privileged are covered

by media differently when sexuality is a topic of concern (e.g. promiscuity, infidelity, homosexuality, transgenderism), compared to people from a minority and from lower social classes. Discriminatory or preferential coverage only reinforces media bias and the prejudices and classist approaches to issues. Another key example is when covering issues of the B40 as welfare issues rather than human rights issues which only serves to reinforce a problematic framing of the discourse. Terminology as well has been an ongoing issue. Many have lamented that there are sometimes no equivalent terms or meaning gets lost in translation. There are also some spaces that are very intimate in nature, where you have to be a member such as WhatsApp group chats, and other platforms which locals and young people use.¹¹

What are the facilitating factors that help advance the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media?

Four facilitating factors surfaced:

- Journalists and editors, both women and men, who want to and actively push coverage on gender inequality issues. One good example is Star R.AGE.
- Women and men in media who have undergone gender studies/gender sensitisation and/or are well networked with gender equality advocates.
- Organisational or “gender-neutral” social media accounts which act as a buffer against personal attacks.
- Resilience of women and men who continue to speak out for gender equality despite the backlash and personal attacks.

What are the lessons learnt in pushing for and advancing the positive representation/portrayal of gender perspectives, gender diversity and/or gender equality in media? What are the implications for the gender sensitisation of media?

There is a need to be very conscious of the narratives used, that they do not set the parameters that reinforce existing obstacles to the promotion and realisation of gender equality. For e.g., reporting that rape is not as severe a harm as child sexual abuse, even though said by a doctor who has worked in the field for years, is damaging in changing social

¹¹ These are like TikTok, CuriousCat and Bigo.

attitudes and perception towards rape that result in horrific statements for victims to marry their rapists or that rape in marriage does not exist.¹² The narrative that Hinduism accepts transgender people only reinforces the religious framework that decides on which human rights people can enjoy and which they cannot. This consciousness can only come through training or by networking closely with gender equality advocates, including LGBTIQ human rights defenders.

¹² See <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/family/2019/11/29/betrayed-by-the-people-they-trust-the-most?>

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the State/Government

1. The way women's rights issues are discussed, including gender-based violence, must reflect the national agenda to seriously and effectively address these issues. One topic that consistently comes up is about rape, that it is and should always be reported as an issue of power and not about sex. For example, even though sexual consent can be obtained for safer sex practices or under certain conditions, the state/government must acknowledge that rape can still occur when those conditions change. This includes among others ejaculating inside a woman when she has given no consent to this, is rape; when a man pulls off his condom during sexual intercourse despite agreeing to safer sex, is rape. Rape should also not be compared to other forms of crimes on severity, even if it happens once in someone's lifetime.
2. Provide awards to media organisations that play their role well in promoting and advancing the gender equality discourse in a fair and professional manner.
3. Make gender disaggregated data accessible to all so that fear politics and narratives have no effect on masses, and such data can be used to counter such tactics.
4. Establish a public fund to ensure the independence, accountability and effective public role of the fourth estate: media. This will help media play a more effective check and balance role in democracy and governance.
5. Provide gender sensitisation training to talk show hosts and all editors and journalists.

To Civil Society Organisations

1. Explore privilege in translating lived experiences and realities. Assumptions and generalisations as well as faulty and dangerous comparisons (e.g. severity of rape versus child sexual abuse, transgender women are not women, etc.) can become barriers to the gender equality advocacy and particularly in seriously addressing violence against women issues.
2. Provide translation of texts, especially in the Malay language. Even if there is insufficient time, at minimum, translate the headlines. However, sometimes it may be

a matter of the issue not being relevant to many, and it could be that people would show more interest in current issues.

3. Explore strategies that disrupt the gender equality performative discourse, especially when it takes place through mainstream or traditional media. This could be done by developing collaborations with new media outlets or platforms.
4. If you cannot develop the content, share and share again. Keep the message in the public eye.
5. Make counter or alternative narratives fun.
6. Do an analysis of the narratives to identify common ground and contradictions, and beware of making false equivalences.
7. Study and use the strategies of social media influencers, and adapting these.
8. Use data to dispel fears.

To Media Organisations

1. Adopt gender equality policies that include not only putting women into decision-making positions but on how gender equality issues are news and newsworthy.
2. Provide gender sensitisation training to talk show hosts and all editors and journalists.
3. While viral posts may be made into “news”, it still requires fact-checking and a presentation of a diversity of perspectives.
4. Create a conscious gender beat to cover critical gender issues daily and do the necessary follow up to keep these issues in the public eye (e.g. child marriage, rape as an issue of power, the working conditions for women in factories, etc.).
5. Use the human rights framework in framing issues and not merely in relation to civil and political issues.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given the call for the establishment of a media council in Malaysia, mapping initiatives, agents of change and specific mechanisms/platforms to mainstream gender in the media is critical as a reflective tool in strategizing for the promotion of gender equality in Malaysia's media. There is a need for a more exhaustive mapping, to include looking at opportunities and lost opportunities in promoting and advancing the gender equality discourse. Emerging gender indicators have also shown it is imperative to include indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, which can help shape and bring about a critical gender consciousness and lens for people in media and in the write-up of issues.

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