Wacana Pembangunan/*Discourses on Development*

Globalisation and Its Challenges to Gender Mainstreaming in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Gender mainstreaming entered mainstream development planning consciousness in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing when it was highlighted in the Platform for Action. However, the concept of gender mainstreaming predated the Beijing Conference. In Boserup's 1970 watershed book, she argued that women were marginalised and suffered under discriminatory practices in development planning. A decade later, Rogers (1980) took it a step further by arguing that it is not so much that women needed development, but that development needed women. She argued that women were development agents rather than mere recipients. Thus, the battle cry in development discourse of the 1970s and 80s was the "integration of women into development". This redefinition of women from welfare beneficiaries to rational economic agents placed women firmly in the development agenda.

However, it became increasingly clear that making women visible in the development process is a necessary, but insufficient condition for the betterment of women. Treating women as appendages and as a separate category in 'special projects' merely served to further marginalised them. Women's issues were often pigeonholed, sidelined and merely given symbolic recognition. In addition, 'special women's projects' reinforced pre-existing societal values and practices regarding women. In other words, development interventions advocated the involvement of women but it did not promote gender mainstreaming.

Gender mainstreaming as a strategy seeks to ensure that both women and men have equitable access to development resources and opportunities. It advocates the full participation of women (and men) in every stage of the development process from planning to implementation to monitoring and evaluation. It is development for and by the people in the truest sense of the word. Let us now turn to examine how Malaysia is faring in terms of gender equity.

GENDER EQUITY IN MALAYSIA

In 1995, Malaysia ratified (with reservations) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and in 2001, the Ministry of Women and Family Development was established. In August of the same year, the Federal Constitution Article 8(2) was amended to include the word 'gender' as being prohibited from discrimination. Although the word 'women' was for the first time introduced into the development agenda as outlined in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995), it was not until a decade later, in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) that the momentum of gender mainstreaming gathered speed. In 2003, gender budgeting was piloted in five Ministries (Education, Higher Education, Health, Human Resources and Rural and Regional Development). Gender budgeting in this context meant integrating gender information into decision-making on policies and prioritising resources in order to achieve gender equity. Gender Focal Points were also introduced in 39 Ministries to monitor issues of gender which arise in the work of these Ministries. In August 2004, the government agreed to the implementation of a policy of at least 30 percent women in decision-making positions in the public sector (Norhayati Sulaiman 2007). In May 2007, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development launched the Malaysian Gender Gap Index (MGGI), which is a new index designed to measure the extent of gender inequality in Malaysia.

Without going into the technicalities of the MGGI, it suffice to say that it works very much like the Human Development Index (HDI) that is, when there is no gender inequality in a society, the MGGI takes on a value of 0 and when gender inequality is at a maximum, it takes on a value of 1. It is a composite index and does not take into account the complexity of gender inequality and other factors such as legislations and gender-based violence. Although it is based on a simplistic value of a relative gender gap, it is a working tool and a beginning. The MGGI looks at four dimensions covering the areas of health, education and economic activity and the empowerment of women. By this, it means women in position of decision-making power.

The MGGI Index indicated that women are doing well in health and education but doing very poorly in labour force participation rate. The female labour force participation rate is 47.3 percent in comparison to men at 80.9 percent in the year 2004. Women join the labour force and drop out rapidly during child-bearing and child-rearing years and do not return. The picture is even more bleak when it comes to the empowerment of women. Out of 219 members in the house of representatives, only 17 are women. In other words, women make up only 9.6 percent share of elected parliamentarians. The percentage share of appointed senators is only 33.3 percent and in the public sector, out of 28 Ministries, there are only 3 female director-generals. For JUSA posts (top posts in the Malaysian Civil Service), women represented only 24.6 percent. Women

make up 6.9 percent of ambassadors and high commissioners and 7.6 percent in the corporate sector as board of directors (ibid). Such is the national picture of women's position in Malaysia.

Discussions of gender mainstreaming in Malaysia are often concentrated on efforts made in the formal sectors. My argument in this paper is that mainstreaming mainstream women is one thing, the challenges posed by globalization is another. Women are a diverse constituency. They have different resources, power and identities. This is exacerbated by structural inequalities in society and intersected by a myriad of positionalities including ethnicity, class, age, geographical location and migrant status. As Malaysia's economy becomes more and more globalised, there will be various groups of women who will fall through the gaps of gender mainstreaming in the way that it is conceived in this country. To illustrate what I mean, I will now turn my attention to three groups of women.

TRANSMIGRANT WOMEN AS WORKERS AND WIVES

Much ink has been spilt on defining globalisation. For the purpose of this discussion, I will merely use the word to mean the intensification of global flows of people, capital, technology and commodities and the compression of the world in terms of time and space. One aspect of globalisation which is relevant to this discussion is the feminisation of the transmigration of labour. Although the movement of people on a global scale is not a new phenomenon, what makes it different in contemporary times is the scale in which it is occurring. Since the 1980s, there has been an unprecedented rise in international migration in the Asia-Pacific region (Chow 2002). The international division of labour and the export of labour intensive industries from the matured economies in the North to the emerging economies in Asia meant that many countries faced accelerated urbanisation as rural migrants take up newly created jobs in the new economic priority zones (EPZs) in their countries. The rapid growth of export led industrialisation has resulted in an increased participation of women in the work-force and a tightening of the labour market as wages increased. The depletion of labour reserves in the rural areas meant that cheap labour had to be imported from neighbouring countries to fuel the expansion. However, by the late 1990s, vibrant economies in the region such as Singapore attracted not only unskilled labour but also professional and highly skilled migrants. It has been estimated that guest migrants workers accounted for 20 percent of the total labour force in Singapore and Malaysia, over 10 percent in Hong Kong and six percent in Thailand by the mid 1990s (Chow 2002). This would have risen over the last decade. Although in the early waves of trans-national migration, male workers were the active migrants and women followed as dependent wives and daughters, recent studies have showed important changes

(ibid). There is a feminisation of trans-national migration where women are now autonomous migrants. In other words, there is a shift from male migration or family migration to the migration of individuals and that of women.

Global estimates by sex revealed that from 1960-2000, female migrants have reached the same number as male migrants. By 2000, female migrants constituted more than half (51 percent) of all migrants in the developed world and about 46 percent of all migrants in developing countries (Piper 2005). This trend is particularly acute in Asia where it has been reported that 70 percent of women migrant workers globally are Asian (Matsui 1999). Statistics from Indonesia revealed that out of every 100 female migrant workers there are only 36 male migrant workers (Wee & Sim 2004). The major sending countries include the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Sri Lanka and the major receiving countries have been Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Canada and the European Union. Southeast Asia is thus a region that includes both sending and receiving countries. Malaysia for instance, sends workers to Singapore in particular and receives from Indonesia in particular, while Thailand sends workers to Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan and receives workers from Myanmar and Laos. In the Malaysian state of Sabah, it has been estimated that 24 percent of its population in the year 2000 were foreigners (Jones 2004). The number of illegal migrants has been estimated to be equal to or even greater than the number of legal migrants.

Women migrants are mainly employed as domestic workers and a large proportion also work in the sex-related entertainment industry (Matsui 1999). Employment in these sectors is invisible and exploitative and women are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. A large proportion of migrant women in the region are forsaken by their own governments and marginalised by the host governments, both of whom benefit greatly from their labour – in terms of remittance to home countries and economic development of recipient countries. Just to contextualise the magnitude of the problem, we are looking at a conservative estimate of tens of millions of Asian women on the move (Wee & Sim 2004). For these women, how might gender equity and gender mainstreaming look?

Apart from work migration, women also migrate for marriage. With globalisation and the ubiquitous use of the internet, the phenomenon of mail-order bride is an area of intense research interest. As this is not yet a major issue in Malaysia, I will not address it here. Suffices to say that foreign wives of local men whose application for residency and citizenship is protracted and uncertain – what of gender mainstreaming for them?

HOMEWORKERS, OUTWORKERS AND WOMEN IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Another aspect of globalisation which has greatly affected women is the transformation of the employment structure. One particular gendered change which impacts greatly on women is the increasing casualisation of labour where home-working replaces employment in formal settings and where payment by piece rates replaces monthly wages. Pearson (1994:243) explained it very well when she reported, ... The reasons for using homeworkers who operate through a web of subcontractors, are various. Outworking allows the main supplier responsible for the export contract to minimize overheads, to adjust the size of the workforce to changes in demand, and to save on labour costs. The study estimated that main contractors saved between 20-40 percent on wage costs, with additional savings through avoiding non-wage payments such as taxation, social insurance and welfare payments, not to mention factory space, storage space, utilities and materials... It has become apparent that large numbers of married women and young mothers are involved in a network of industrial subcontracting within their own homes. Such work includes sub-assembly of electronics and electrical goods, sewing of garments, finishing tasks such as removing threads from factory-sewn garments and textiles, stitching of hats, socks, scarves and embroidery work both by hand and machine. Women are also employed in food-processing for example, garlic peeling and food packing. Many more sell food by the roadside and market their wares in makeshift stalls. Given that many women work in the invisible, informal sector, how would gender mainstreaming look for this group of women?

INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Let us now turn our attention to one last group of women – indigenous women in the various countries in the region (the First People). With globalisation and increasing penetration of a highly monetised economy, indigenous people are impacted as never before. Large scale cash cropping through plantation agriculture, deforestation through excessive logging and expansion of urban centres have all led to an encroachment on customary rights land. In addition, commercialisation of forest products for example, wildlife meat, ferns, fruits, rattan and scented wood have all led to an over-exploitation of forest resources which resulted in a deteriorating environment. For this group of women, gender equity is merely an equality of poverty. As they struggle to maintain their livelihood and traditional way of life, their pressing concern would be to stand alongside their men in their battle against encroachment and total incorporation into wider society and with it, a loss of cultural pride and identity. From the hill tribes of northern Thailand to the *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia and the

various ethnic groups in Sarawak, Sabah, Indonesia and the Philippines, the threat to their socio-economic structure and the break-down of their cultural fabric are real and serious. For them, the question is not how to mainstream, but mainstream to what and on whose terms?

The situation is even more ambiguous for indigenous women in particular. First, they are discriminated because of their ethnic minority status and gender when they seek wage work outside of their communities in order to meet their increasing dependence on cash. In other words, the discrimination which they encounter *outside* of their communities is two-fold – both on the grounds of ethnicity and gender. Second, their status and position *within* their own communities are eroded as their important role as food producers and custodians of rites and rituals associated with their belief systems are diminished by a shrinking subsistence agricultural base and increasing outside influence.

Semai women in Peninsular Malaysia articulated their encounters with the state and globalizing forces as such, "One is the outright acquisition of more and more *Semai* lands for 'development' projects that are invariably for others. The other is the imposition of a global culture, with its in-built male bias which replaces the indigenous social structure and worldview" (Nicholas et al. 2003:122). From my long association with the different groups of indigenous women in Sarawak, I believe I can safely say that many would welcome improved standards of living and the preservation of their traditional way of life, but they would want to achieve these on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

Women are not a homogenous category, their interests are diverse and they stand in different positions from one another, separated by class and ethnicity and in many instances, also age. From the preceding discussion, it would appear that gender mainstreaming is well and good for mainstream women but what of others? As we embark on our quest for gender equity and gender mainstreaming, many challenges lie ahead, some of which would require trans-national cooperation in a region which has seen some of the most globalized economies. In others, it would require specific measures worked out in consultation with specific groups. For this, civil society must be allowed to flourish and political will must be present for gender equity to take root.

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