Women and Politics: The Contestation for Visibility

Politik dan Wanita: Perbahasan mengenai Keberadaan

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ABSTRACT

The history of voting in the West peppered with women's struggles to achieve a voice in politics. Gender and elections in a democratic system vary according to context. Still, gender equality and equity for women have always required the government's intervention. The feasible way to empower women and to ensure gender sensitivity has been to enforce rules and regulations. Nevertheless, women's political participation in Malaysia is still low due to power distances between genders resulting from a patriarchal system. However, we have to look beyond just numbers to assess the impact of women on politics. This article argues that though the number of female political representatives is low, their visibility should also be gauged from their behind-the-scenes contribution as party members. This study was drawn from the election campaign in 2018 using non-participant observation and secondary data to challenge the prevailing Western approach to gender studies. The findings show that some of the factors mentioned above are not necessarily the reasons for the sluggish appearance of women's participation in politics.

Keywords: women; politics; visibility; participation; democracy

ABSTRAK

Sejarah pilihan raya di Barat dipenuhi dengan perjuangan wanita untuk mendapatkan hak berpartisipasi dalam politik. Pilihan raya dan gender dalam sistem demokrasi mempunyai pengalaman konteks yang berbeza, namun persoalan mengenai gender, hak setara dan saksama memerlukan campur tangan kerajaan. Cara berkesan ialah memperkasa wanita bagi memastikan sensitiviti gender dapat dikuatkuasakan melalui peraturan dan perundangan. Di sebalik penguatkuasaan ini, partisipasi wanita dalam politik di Malaysia masih lagi rendah disebabkan jurang sosial kesan daripada amalan sistem patriarki. Artikel ini menguji faktor hambatan diluar ukuran statistik penyertaan perwakilan wanita kerana faktor pilihan dan keberadaan wanita adalah substantif dalam mengukur penglibatan wanita. Artikel ini berhujah bahawa keberadaan wanita di belakang tabir harus diiktiraf sebagai sumbangan dalam berpolitik dan bukan sahaja diukur apabila wanita menjadi pemimpin. Kajian ini menggunakan data sekunder dan teknik pemerhatian tidak turut serta kempen pilihan raya 2018 untuk mencabar pendekatan feminisme Barat. Hasil dapatan menghuraikan bahawa faktor partriaki dan hubungan kuasa tidak seharusnya dilihat sebagai sebab atau alasan kepada penyertaan lemah wanita dalam politik.

Kata kunci: wanita; politik; keberadaan; partisipasi; demokrasi

INTRODUCTION

The presumption that democracy allows gender participation to grow without 'sweat and tears' may be overrated. Throughout different histories and contexts, gender issues concerning democracy have blossomed in various ways. Regardless of its basic principles, democracy and gender have a sometimes antagonistic relationship, where there are conflicts and resolutions. This article discusses both the competition and solutions which enable gender and democracy to live together as partners with mutual respect. This article argues that women are still politically marginalized at the peak of democracy, but such marginalization needs to be redefined. The joint assessment of marginalization is quantifying the size or number of women's political participation. However, as political representatives, their possession of cultural capital such as values, positions, preferences, and visibility is not accounted for sufficiently.

CRITIQUES OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy exists in various forms. Populist democracy promotes general will and a contract for public services by representatives with integrity (Coleman & FereJohn 1986; Urbinati 1998). Majoritarian democracy favors the Westminster model of a simple majority and opposes a minority (Kramnick 2003). The polyarchy model of democracy acknowledges the plurality of entities in a democratic government (Dahl 2005). The Madisonian democracy, as featured in James Madison's Publius, recognizes the essentiality of public choice but challenges veto players (Tsebelis 2002). The Tocquevillian democracy, retrieved from Alexis de Tocqueville, outlines that geographical space determines the need for decentralization and active civil society to ensure democracy will prevail (Kramnik 2003). Elitist democracy, meanwhile, provides us with a reality check that democracy is managed by political elites (Parenti 2002; Sniderman et al. 2009). Instead, consociation democracy promotes power-sharing among competing groups (Lijphart 1969; 1977; 1991). Lastly, the semi or quasi-democracy argues that democracy coexists in controlled and partial freedom in a consistent periodical electoral system (Jesudason 1996; Case 1993; Zakaria 1989).

Based on the critics above, consociation democracy becomes the feasible system to Malaysia, because a simple majority is inapplicable in a multiethnic society with strong ethnic identities, religious cleavages, and competing interests (Lijphart 1969; 1977; 1991). Chua (2004) argued that democracy is not even applicable to a state where an ethnic minority dominates the market. The Chinese are the ethnic minority in most Southeast Asian countries, but they mainly control the economy. The consociation model also rebuts the elitist democracy perspective by asserting that power-sharing within heterogeneous communities could still result in harmony through the mechanism of bargaining, negotiation, and mediation (Shamsul 2011; Kartini 2014). Hence, the critique that arose in the heyday of democracy was construed heavily with local contexts that translated the philosophical ideas of democracy into an indigenized form (Keane, 2011). Thus, Malaysia was lambasted as "repressive and syncretic," "semi-democratic," and "quasi-democratic" (Jesudason 1996; Case 1993; Zakaria 1989).

Most parts of the world have experienced the indigenization of democracy. The local contexts simply mold democracy into its unique form. Asian' values,' including norms, culture, and beliefs, have affected democracy so that essences of feudalism, authoritarianism, and government intervention are inevitable. For instance, Malaysia is a practicing democracy with a few essential elements such as organizing an election every five years, electing people's representatives, and establishing a Federal constitution as the supreme law of the land. Nevertheless, there are still issues that remain topics of debate, including freedom of speech, money politics, corruption, and a single party alliance dominating the political landscape for more than fifty years after independence (Welsh 2015; Kartini (b) 2014). Likewise, Singapore is another country with a single dominant party, the People's Action Party (PAP), which reigned for fifty years and held an election every five years. However, Singapore is not absent from being criticized as a country that practices authoritarian democracy to maintain order (Kurlantzick 2015).

The absence of gender discourse within the various forms of democracy mentioned above is examined with the structures, institutions, processes, practices, systems, and people. Aside from certain aspects of democracy, which are highly attached to the Western definition, there is gender bias among its rubric where elections, rights, and liberty are concerned. Although democracy was praised for its foundations of rights to life, property, and liberty, the notion of gender has to be tailored into the discussion of democracy to convince one that democracy upholds gender rights (Rai 2008; Dahlerup 2006, 2005; Goetz and Shireen 2002). Throughout the evolution of democracy over the years, it has never been discussed thoroughly concerning gender. Many might think the philosophical tenets of democracy would support gender equality through enabling participation in the public realm. However, women's participation in democratic countries, be it in politics or the market economy, comes with different struggles.

DEMOCRACY AND GENDER

Democracy is about having fundamental rights, property protection, life, liberty, and limited government intervention. Later on, democracy evolved and constructed to protect the elite and maintain the status quo. However, eventually, indigenization was submerged into the practice of democracy. In the free market, democracy was a

laisses-faire concept, which entailed free-market competition based on Adam Smith's idea of the invisible hand, which determined the price due to supply and demand.

Consequently, free-market outcomes such as price, profit, or market efficiency did not recognize gender as pivotal to profit-making. The vision to pursue justice in gender relations, particularly in economic development, appeared to challenge the neo-liberal perspective. The neoliberal view is concerned with improving market efficiency through limited government interventions, trade liberalization, and unregulated competition. On the contrary, the feminist perspective is concerned with social justice, right and wrong, equality in employment, and wages. These approaches rely on state intervention to assign value to women's work. Therefore intervention in a free market economy distorts the market (O'Brien et al. 2000), or in other words, a distortion to democracy in the laisses-faire economy.

However, Kwong (2005) opines that the debates on capitalism and gender are anchored by the key ingredients of economic freedom, including personal choice, voluntary exchange, competition, human rights and protection, and property ownership that liberate individuals and families to take charge of their economic being. Thus, in gender, such liberation allows women to overcome traditions, customs, superstitions, and prejudices to contribute to the county. Women in the employment sectors in China showed tremendous improvement. They were responsible for 25 percent of the business companies since 1978. In Mexico, for the last five years, 32 percent of women are business owners. In Hungary, approximately more than 40 percent of women started their companies in 1990 (Business Women Network, 2000). Alas, the positive and negative impacts of capitalism are framed within globalization arguments, yet women's issues due to inequality of payment, education, health care, and disenfranchisement of the poor are still prevailing.

Meanwhile, a society without gender equality is structured by a patriarchal system, a hierarchy of order, vertical power distribution, religious values, and cultural rigidity that limit women's advancement. There is a glass ceiling that needs to be broken everywhere women go. To be challenged – women have to go against the odds. Nevertheless, do women need to equip themselves with a traditionally masculine attitude to break the glass ceiling? For example, in Indonesia, Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879-1904) was viewed as a politically active intellectual and Indonesia's first feminist who, despite being secluded at home following tradition, continued to self-educate and formed opinions on social processes affecting her life (Mahy, 2012).

Another definition of democracy regarding citizen participation can be retrieved from the Universal Declaration of Democracy. The Principles of Democracy recognizes that democracy's success is based on the genuine partnership between men and women in state and society affairs, where they are mutually complementary to each other based on their differences (IPU, 2016). Women's participation is an essential element of democracy besides elections, the middle class, education, and political literacy (Paxton, 2008). Furthermore, Dahlerup (2006) posits that women's participation in politics marks that democracy exists. Democracy has to be inclusive, and the division of power must include women in the democratization process because disregarding women will degrade the meaning of democracy, which is supposed to value citizens' participation equally (Waylen, 2003).

The assessment of women's political achievement should not limit its scope to counting the number of women representatives at the decision-making level. The efforts, struggles, and impact of women's movements have to be assessed and recognized in multidimensional ways. Additionally, the historical facts of women's suffrages and centuries of struggle in advocating equal rights displayed that many women at the decision-making level were not what was required. Changes and transformations to the law, access to education, recruitment in the job market, and institutional roles were achieved despite the uneven number of female to male representatives at the parliament or decision-making levels.

POLITICS AND SUFFRAGE

UNESCO (2003) defines gender as an ascribed status, which includes roles and responsibilities based on biological sex, i.e., male or female, determined by the family, culture, and society. Gender identity, meanwhile, is an achieved status that is self-defined; as a result of a combination of inherent and extrinsic or environmental factors. Often, gender roles are an outward expression of gender identity. Nature versus nature is an ongoing debate over the attainment of gender identity and gender roles, with some sectors believing one is born into one's gender and the others considering that one is socialized

into becoming one's gender. Besides, Judith Butler envisions gender as a performative act achieved through daily self-presentation (Chan, 2018). The former view may represent the authority-defined viewpoint, while the Butlerian idea represents the everyday-defined perspective.

The initial emphasis on gender studies appeared to revolve around equal rights for women, including participation in politics. However, the focus shifts to achieving balance participation while empowering women's roles. Without a doubt, men have enjoyed supremacy in politics, while for women, the voting was proof of their struggle for equality, even in the democratic United States. Women's suffrage in the U.S. was evident that at the peak of democracy, priority was given to men in terms of election and the right to vote. The first black man to vote was Thomas Mundy Peterson in 1870, while the first women waited another fifty years before voting in 1920. The struggles continue till today. Ditonto and Andersen (2018) observed that voters are likely to assess women candidates in isolation. In a concurrent contest, female candidates are not adversely affected when they are the only woman on a voter's ballot.

GENDER AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIA

Relatively, in Malaysia, women were a lot more celebrated. There was no suffrage movement in Malaysian history. The first General Election (G.E.) was held in 1955 before independence (Malaya declared independence on August 31, 1957), and it was open to both genders to cast their votes. Not just to gender but also to all ethnics groups to convince the British that Malaya was ready for independence (Shamsul 2015). Moreover, this first election in Malaya was held before independence. The colony was still colonizing the country, the absence of a middle-class community, the rate of illiteracy was at its peak, and the state was without a national identity due to excessive immigrants brought in by the colony; in other words, the election was conducted without democracy.

A discourse about women and political participation should capture women's visibility at different layers of position and context in society. To recognize women's achievement in politics, measuring the number of women as representatives at the parliamentary level or specific percentages is oversimplified. Alas, they are degrading women

extraordinary achievements through impactful outcomes, including the establishment of Ministry for Women, Children, and Community (1966), the creation of National Policy for Women (1989), the implementation of gender mainstreaming and empowerment agenda in most public and private services, the recognition of NGOs roles in advocating women agenda. Women have played the 'backbone' position in holding the institution, society, and family together and allowing the nation to progress sustainably.

In the Malay Muslim culture, the cultural and religious construct embraces that a mother is the door to heaven or heaven is underneath a mother's feet, exhibits the conjuring respect to women. The perception of hands that rock the cradle gives value to appreciate women as mothers, sisters, and wives or wives cultivated in society through Islamic tenets and practice. A certain percentage of women may not need to be at the decision-making level because their visibilities and influences spread across ministries through their multi roles of contributions to ensure political pressure for gender empowerment is progressing continuously. Women's leadership and decision-making perceptions have to move beyond counting female representatives at the parliamentary level. Women are making substantive impacts even though their representatives at the decision-making level, specifically at the parliament from six decades ago until the present, are considered very low.

WOMEN AND ELECTION

Approximately there is more than 50 percent of members of political parties are women, including the voters. However, female representatives in parliament are outnumbered by their male counterparts. Malaysia targeted those female representatives should reach at least 30 percent at the parliamentary level. Malaysia only had 10.4 percent female representatives in General Election (GE)2008 and GE2013. Nevertheless, the current numbers of women representatives in 2016 had increased to 10.8 percent due to by-election. The number of independent candidates among women also increased from zero in GE2008 to 12 female candidates in GE2013. Tables 1, 2, and 3 display the number of female representatives at the Parliament, State Legislative Assembly, and Political Parties.

In GE14 of 2018, there were 60 female candidates out of 162 male candidates battling 222 total seats at the parliamentary level and 150 female

candidates out of 355 male candidates battling 505 seats at the state assembly level. Comparing GE13 and GE14, the increased percentage of female candidates was 0.8 percent; in GE13, the rate of female candidates was 9.9 percent, and in GE14, the portion was 10.7 percent. The voice of frustration among women activists was clear, but the puzzle for such low female candidates in the election continue to hit the question on the mainstream media. This article is enthusiastic about discussing women's participation and politics, and it attempts to redirect the discussion beyond the quantifiable number of female representatives in assessing women's impact.

Furthermore, manifestos outlined by both political alliances (Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional) also displayed concern over women's issues. The B.N manifesto for GE14 was too micro-managed with overwhelming details of each plan. B.N manifesto consisted of fourteen core agendas with 364 initiatives. Such a thick and detailed manifesto was unattractive because it was absent of precise design and concrete plan. Alas, B.N took an easy way of exhibiting an accumulation of work done by each ministry based on its annual report to produce the manifesto. One cannot merely blame the B.N for being overly concerned about the manifesto because the party was eager to present all the outputs that had achieved over forty years of administration. The strategy changed in the simplified version of the B.N manifesto, with women's agendas were put first on the simple brochure. However, Pakatan Harapan's manifesto was convenient and straightforward. It displayed ten core agendas with women issue was ranked fourth, and other women's benefits were embedded in different plans. Nevertheless, the promises to realize such a manifesto in hundred days as chanted by P.H were impractically impossible.

Based on Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, women's participation is improved incrementally and gradually over the years. Although women's participation in politics is low and still miles away to reach the target of at least 30 percent participation at the parliamentary and ministry levels, females' involvement in politics has been beyond the structurally formal political party or parliamentary boundary. Women's role and function in society are well noticed and outstandingly addressed in Malay literature, such as Hikayat Faridah Hanum, Tun Fatimah, and Awang Sulong Merah Muda (Puteh & Zahir, 2016). Again, the impact of women's symbols and roles, namely as a healer, shaman, warrior, midwife, and teacher, is exhibited in the literature ingrained in local communities' custom norms and values, recognizing functionality and practicality.

Furthermore, in the Malayan Union's wake in 1946, women were demonstrating with men on the street, and they walked for more than ten miles showing their physical and emotional resistance against the British and Malayan Union. Hirschman (2016) argues that the Malay women nationalists during the late 1940s were the most remarkable feature of post-World War II Malayan politics. Women have been visible as party members doing all the hard work for party survival during the campaign activities, including promoting candidates from door to door, advertising the street flash mob, collecting donations, preparing food or refreshment for meetings, managing the administration, and clerical jobs for the party.

TABLE 1. Representatives in Parliament, 1959-2018

Year of election	Female representatives (%)		Male representatives (%)		Total seats in parliament
1959	3	2.90	101	97.10	104
1964	2	2.90	101	97.10	104
1969	2	1.38	142	98.62	144
1974	5	3.25	149	96.75	154
1978	7	4.54	147	95.46	154
1982	8	5.19	146	94.81	154
1986	7	3.95	170	96..05	177
1990	11	6.11	169	93.89	180
1995	15	7.80	177	92.20	192
1999	20	10.30	173	89.70	193
2004	23	10.50	196	89.50	219
2008	24	10.81	198	89.19	222
2013	24	10.81	198	89.19	222
2018	28	12.60	194	87.39	222
Total	199	23	222	199	10.4

TABLE 2. Members of House Representative by Political Parties and Sex, 2008, 2013 and 2018

Political Party	2008				2013				2018			
	Total	Male	Female	Female (%)	Total	Male	Female	Female (%)	Total	Male	Female	Female (%)
Barisan Nasional (BN)	140	127	13	9.9	133	119	14	10.5	76	67	9	11.8
Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	12	1	7.7
Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS)	23	20	3	13.0	21	19	2	9.5	18	17	1	5.6
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	28	24	4	14.3	38	34	4	10.5	42	35	7	16.7
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	31	28	3	9.7	30	27	3	10.0	50	41	9	18.0
Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0
Parti Kesejahteraan Insan Tanah Air (KITA)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0
Bebas	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	3	3	0	0.0
Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	11	11	0	0.0
Parti Warisan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	8	7	1	12.5
United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0.0	1	1	0	0.0
Total	222	199	23	10.4	222	199	23	10.4	222	194	28	12.6

Note: As of June 2018, Source KOSMO (May 10, 2018); Sinar.com (retrieved online June 12, 2018)

Table 3. Member of State Legislative Assembly by Political Parties and Sex, 2008, 2013 and 2018

Political Party	2008				2013				2018			
	Total	Male	Female	Female (%)	Total	Male	Female	Female (%)	Total	Male	Female	Female (%)
Barisan Nasional (BN)	368	341	27	7.3	330	300	30	9.1	166	153	18	10.8
Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS)	84	80	4	4.8	85	79	6	7.1	90	89	1	1.1
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	79	68	11	13.9	107	86	21	19.6	106	87	19	18..0
Parti Reformasi Negeri (STAR)					1	1	0	0.0	2	2	0	0.0
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	41	37	4	9.8	52	44	8	15.4	69	62	7	10.1
Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	29	27	2	6.9

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Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	22	20	2	9.0
Parti Warisan	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	21	18	3	14.2
Total	576	530	46	8.0	576	511	65	11.3	505	453	52	10.2

Note: Based on General Election (G.E.) 2004, GE2008, GE2013, G.E. for Sabah 2011 & Sarawak 2016, and Small Elections.Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) founded on August 2015 and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) founded in August 2016. The number of seats increased during the Sarawak eleventh state election, 2016.
Source: Parliament of Malaysia; Kosmo (retrieved online May 10, 2018)

Table 4. Total candidate based on Gender for Parliamentary and State seats in GE-14, 2018

Gender	Parliamentary seat: a total of 222		
	Candidate	Won	Percentage (%)
Female	60	28	46.7
Male	1774	194	10.9

Gender	State seat: a total of 505		
	Candidate	Won	Percentage (%)
Female	150	50	33.3
Male	1224	455	37.2

Source: 67 straights fights, 474 three-way battles in GE14 at https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/04/362978/67-straights-fights-474-three-way-battles-ge14-nsttv (retrieved online June 20, 2018)

VISIBILITY BEYOND QUANTITY

We outline a few factors that can be considered to understand gender participation and politics in Malaysia. Although some of these issues can further be contested and debatable, the arguments that put forward is to recognize women's choice not to be active in politics as gender rights and preference. Such an option should be respected rather than criticized. Analysts must begin to assess women's participation beyond the quantifiable number of female representatives at the parliamentary level.

PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Most gender scholars share the impression that Malay women are bonded with traditional cultural values that are patriarchal (Jamilah 1992; Ng and Chee 1999), and most women are caught in a dilemma between the modern challenges of life and traditions (Kalthum et al. 2008). Moreover, the patriarchal system was blamed for being the deterrence cause for women to move forward. Burns (2007), Harrison & Munn (2007), and Lovenduski (2015) argue that the socialization process, current employment, and marital status are factors that create the gender gap in political participation. Women are assumed to have lesser information on politics than men due to their socialization process identified in their traditional realm and task. Furthermore, the marital status also discouraged women from being alert and aware of state and political issues because their close encounter is now revolving around family matters.

However, Hirschman (2016: 35) argued that European observers such as Raffles (1965) and Reid (1988) wrote books and chronicles back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that described women's visibility roles in public life, especially in commerce, as one of the features of Southeast Asia. Another example of women's value was the bride-wealth custom, where the grooms' family had to pass the gold, property, or gifts to the bride as dowry. Women were also identified as healers that conduct spiritual matters and spirit mediums. Moreover, Malay women were also able to keep their father's name even after they were married. Men retained their authority in statecraft activities involving metal, hunting, house building, and plowing fields.

Nevertheless, the women's sphere was extended to a broad range of activities such as planting,

harvesting, weaving, pottery, and marketing (Hirschman 2016). Although men and women are not considered equal in all respects, both activities and roles are defined within their gender's capacity and capability. Thus, the patriarchal system is debatable as a cause of such passive participation of women in politics.

POWER VERTICAL AND HIERARCHICAL ORDER

Most political parties have the sheer power and hierarchical order that flow from top to bottom. A party leader holds supreme control over his followers. In the election, the central committee members, who are most likely to be males, will determine the winnable candidates for parliament and state seats. Here, the rationale of winning and securing victory is integral to party survival, thus choosing the suitable candidates and placing them in the right constituencies are vital. Male candidates dominate both parliamentary and state levels because the central committees' sheer power and hierarchical order limit the chances to add women as the eligible candidates. It is a challenge for women candidates unless they have an excellent track record than the male candidate. However, providing a temporary quota system could increase women candidates in the election (Dahlerup 2006).

In GE2013, the numbers of women decided to be an independent candidate made a new history of an election. Both BN and Pakatan exhibited a total of 61 candidates, male and female, that expressed their boldness to compete as independent candidates due to disagreement with their major political party's decision. Consequently, their repercussions of action landed them to be expelled from the party. For the female candidates, such a story never appeared in their traditionalist dictionary of activity before. Female candidates are known for their loyalty and obedience. It marks a new variation of behavior among women that challenge the power vertical and hierarchical order (Junaidi 2021). The example can be traced back to GE2013 when Kamilia Ibrahim (UMNO) and Janice Lee (DAP) were expelled from their parties for objecting to the parties' decision and fought as independent candidates (Kartini 2014:107).

Central committee members must be aware that voters' literacy is viewing gender as insignificant. They vote for a candidate based on a few essential factors: the track record of service, public relations, engagement with local constituents, and absence of scandal. For instance, in G.E. 2013 (http://www.wanitaumno.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/CALON-WANITA-BN-PRU13-DUN-FINAL.pdf), women candidates including Nurrul Izzah at Lembah Pantai, Noriah Kasnon at Sungai Besar, Azalina Othman at Pengerang, Nancy Shukri at Batang Sadong, Normala Abd Samad at Pasir Gudang, Rosnah Abd Rashid Shirlin at Papar, Noraini Ahmad at Parit Sulong, Asmaiza Ahmad at Chuping, Suraya Yaacob at Sungai Tiang, Nor Sabrina Mohd Noor at Bandar Baharu proved that being a woman was not an obstacle for them to win the election even though their fight was against the male candidates.

In GE14 of 2018, 28 out of 60 female candidates won the parliamentary seats, and for the state level, 50 out of 150 female candidates claimed the victory. In both parliamentary and state levels, the chances showed more than 30% female candidates won the state assembly seats, and more than 40% female candidates won the parliamentary seats that they had contested in three or four-cornered battles. In comparing male to male candidates, there were 1774 male contestants, and only 194 males won the parliamentary seats, while for the state, there were 1224 male contestants, and only 455 males won the seats. Female candidates' achievement exhibits that women are winnable candidates, and it challenges the cliché that male candidates are more likely to succeed and secure their votes. The male candidates have a stricter fight than female candidates because they have to compete for the fixed number of seats at the parliament and state levels compared to the female candidates (see Table 4).

The result showed that gender is not a determinant factor to win or lose in the election. Voters had shown generous support for female candidates in both parliamentary and state levels. The rationale for supporting the female candidates includes a track record, political plan for improvement, credibility and integrity, interpersonal skills, and local issues. Female candidates have been using strategies like knowing their voters and attending issues revolving in their constituencies to gain trust and support. Such efforts are accumulated over the years, and they are willing to go from door to door in the neighborhood, informing their vision and mission for social development and improvement. The method of winning the heart and mind with a personal touch has allowed female candidates for both B.N. and P.H. to secure their victory.

WOMEN PREFERENCES

Women's self-preference could also contribute to questioning the poor women's participation in politics. Women political party members are likely to vote for male over female candidates (Azizan 2015). According to Kalthum et al. (2008), women's orientation is still towards their reproductive role and family matters than their selves-fulfillment. If they face a dilemma between political careers and family, then the family has always been given priority. A woman's state of mind is correct and rational to think of her family first. However, such rationality is counterproductive and provide a reproductive role as a reason for women's capacity to be a leader – they are in the dilemma of weighing between career and family.

However, the gender-structured system in party and government deferred women from participating fully in politics, especially when the position at both levels (federal and state), including appointments, tasks, administration, and, work hours are insensitive to women's needs. Thus, it is unfair to lament such discouraging participation from women due to their self-preference that dislikes politics because of their traditionalist orientation (Kartini 2014). Osawa (2015) argues that conservative women in Japan are aware of politics and enjoy excellent political participation access. However, they remain docile and put more effort into nurturing society's leaders through their feminine and traditional tasks as mothers and wives. They are creating space for political participation while carrying their regular jobs, for instance, 1) changing the expectation as they may not be able to adhere to their traditional tasks hundred percent; 2) choosing the activities that do not contradict their responsibility; 3) maintaining their roles as a mother and wife to benefit the entire society and nation for a long term.

Following Osawa's assessment of conservative women in Japan, Malaysian women may share the same feminine and traditional tasks and are likely to put family first over their political enthusiasm. Still, such a decision must not be viewed as restricting women's rights to political mobility. We have also to acknowledge that a decision not to be active in politics is also a democratic practice. The action or inaction decision is a woman's right to liberty. If that is the case, women are enjoying their freedom to decide what is best for them.

WOMEN VISIBILITY

Another factor in assessing women's low participation in politics is to move beyond the democratic legal-political sphere and context. Cornwall and Goetz (2008) argue that women have been the central players as political and social actors pave their way into the political realm. Previous scholars have blamed the patriarchy, hierarchy, culture, values, and beliefs as the factors that create a vicious cycle for women to be dormant in politics (Jamilah 1992 3; Ng and Chee 1999: 176). However, women had been visible and able to master politics in their everyday-defined activities as party members, activists of community-based organizations, and public advocates. Women have been there in the public realm as entrepreneurs, especially in Penang and Kota Baharu Kelantan: Pasar Khadijah, in Kelantan, is full of women as entrepreneurs that sell agricultural products, merchandise, and textiles (Nurhafilah et al. 2018; Zarina & Zuraida 2016).

Another protruding factor that is away from the common issue of patriarchy and hierarchy is the lack of fund that limits women to further their political participation and agenda. An election in democracy has invented money politics to be part of the polity as long as it is declared (Schaffer 2008). Thus, as men have conquered the political realm long before women, such constraint is managed. Second, the lack of support from family and friends also reduces women's preference in politics. Such a support system is necessary for female politicians to balance the workloads. If the support system from family and friends is absent, women would have to weigh the dilemma, and they are likely to choose family over career. Fourth, the party's goal and intention would minimize women's capacity to be the election candidates, knowing that any political party's reasonable goal is to win the election. The leader will choose winnable candidates to ensure the party's victory will benefit the party. Although more than 50 percent of political party members and voters are within this competition, women give their full support to central committee members' decisions (Kartini 2014).

Women's visibility has been discussed within the context of numbers to measure women's participation (Omojola 2014; Cikaric 2015; Vanzan 2016). On the contrary, women have been visible in politics beyond the formal context. They have been

in public realms as entrepreneurs, healers, teachers, and journalists (Hirschman 2016). In politics, women are the backbones that hold democracy and political parties through their commitment and participation. They work diligently in a political campaign, conducting door-to-door empowerment activities, creating social engagement and awareness on domestic issues, including rights and safety, and state policy. It is important to note and recognize women's informal participation beyond political party positions or formal institutional positions to showcase their impacts on politics and democracy (Zaireeni 2017). Thus the idea of pushing women to be at least 30 percent participation in decision-making level at the parliamentary level or institutions to showcase the impact is contestable.

CONCLUSION

Gender studies face challenges embedded in democracy due to different colonial histories, cultures, beliefs, norms, and values. Such local wisdom and context lead to variations in the form and application of democracy that later affect gender participation in overall aspects. In certain societies and beliefs, gender equality may not apply realistically because a man can never be a woman who bore the children equally. Although women's participation in politics, especially at the parliamentary level, is still under-represented in Malaysia, their substantive contributions must be assessed beyond the number that transformed society. They empower their chances to help others while paving the way for a new generation of women to be an integral part of the legislative processes. Women's contribution and impact should not be limited in the quantifiable mode of participation at the decision-making level but be counted in the form of substantive implications of changing the people's wellbeing and supporting the state sustainably.

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NOTES

1.   The Women's Rights Movement, 1848-1920 at http://history.house.gov/Exhibitios-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/No-Lady Womens-Rights/ (accessed January 14, 2021)

2.   The fourteen general election showed the defeat of BN after more than 40 years in power. BN was established in 1974 but the formed of alliance without the BN labelled was established on 1959 to face the first General Election in Malaya after independence. The common reasons being cited for the defeat were due to scandal and corruption pertaining to 1MDB (the misused of state funds); the introduction of GST tax that outraged the public for enduring highest price for consumers' goods and services; high cost of living; the introduction of Anti Fake News Act of 2018; and also the Mahathir's comeback that swayed the majority Malays voters to vote for Pakatan Harapan, see https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/05/10/analysts-on-bn-loss/

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