

## Young People's Perceptions of Roles and Responsibilities as Political Party Members in Malaysia:

An exploratory analysis

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**Abstract**—Pakatan Rakyat (PR), is a political coalition, consisting of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS). With the exception of PAS, the DAP and PKR parties have initiated a one-youth-wing strategy, to give an equal platform for both young men and women members to excel. However, based on existing literature, such a novel structural change is merely one of several underlying factors that impinge upon men and women's participation, as political party members. Nonetheless, PR's new initiative, gives us an opportunity to document and study the experiences of these members, within these new youth wings. This paper forms a part of a much larger qualitative study, aimed at comparing the experiences of young men and women, as members of PR. It has been set out to both explore and analyze the differences in experiences, as well as the facilitating factors and constraints, which influence young men and women members within the political parties of PR alliance. For this paper, analysis and discussions are limited to the respondents' perceptions, regarding their roles, duties, interests and positions, as party members. By using the snowballing method, 27 respondents were invited to take part in a one-to-one, in-depth interview. The analysis showed that a mere structural change of the PR party is not sufficient to encourage women to be active as political members. The perceptions, of the roles and responsibilities, of both young men and women political party respondents, were shaped by various fundamental factors, such as religion, culture and patriarchal social norms. Moreover, despite existing literature criticizing the patriarchal nature of the political parties in Malaysia, young men and women, in addition to party leaders, also perceived that women's roles and priorities should be at home. The analysis showed more similarities than differences of the perceptions of the young women in PAS, with DAP and PKR

**Keywords**- *young women in politics, political parties, political experiences, political participation, youth in politics*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The young, in any population, are a source of political power. This group consisting of half of the world's population (2009), is an important source of voting power, able to vote a government, in or out. However, evidence shows that young people have different views and conceptions about politics, seeing it as an arena for the older generation, and not linked directly to their own lives

(Quéniart, 2008, Pfaff, 2009, Harris et al., 2010). Even if they are members of political parties, they cannot see themselves playing important roles or being leaders in these parties (Atkeson, 2003). Most saw themselves playing only supportive roles.

In comparison to the young men, the involvement of young women in politics is even lower. Entering politics is hard for women generally, but even harder for 'young' women. With numbers of women members remaining low, previous research have repeatedly highlighted the fact that women were often left out from important political processes led by their men (Papanek, 1977, Manderson, 1980, Wazir, 1982, Danz, 1987, Khoo, 1994, Ibrahim, 1998, Thompson, 2001, Ng et al., 2006)(Papanek, 1977, Manderson, 1980, Wazir, 1982, Danz, 1987, Khoo, 1994, Ibrahim, 1998, Thompson, 2001, Ng et al., 2006).

One of the reasons blamed for this scenario, is the political party structure. Any political party is a complex organisation or institution, shaped by a countries' history, institutional and cultural values, religion and ideological values. How parties view the roles of young men and women, as members of their respective parties, will be influenced by all these factors.

This paper presents and discusses the findings from a bigger study, which explores young men and women experiences, as members of political parties. This paper focuses on the influences and factors that mould the perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, which assumingly emerged from their experiences as members of political parties.

### II. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative approach was used to generate primary data. In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 young men and women members of the political parties of *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR). This method aimed at exploring the experiences of these young men and women, in order to expose the various dimensions in their experiences as members of political parties.

The study was conducted in Penang and Selangor, with participants between 21 and 40 years old, using the snowballing technique. The lowest age of 21, was chosen because that is the eligible voting age in Malaysia, while 40 years old, is the age limit for young women to join political parties within the youth wing. Apart from grouping by age,

participants must be members who have actively participated in all of the party's activities, including previous election campaigns during the preceding 12 months.

All interviews were conducted using a framework of guideline questions, which was developed based on the findings from a small pilot study completed before embarking on the real research.

### III. PERCEPTION OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Some of the perceptions of roles and responsibilities as members, were commonly shared amongst the young men and women members, but some also showed differences in the way they perceived their roles

#### A. Political activism as a duty: Fighting for a cause

In general, participants perceived their political activities as a mark of responsible citizens. They perceived their activism in politics, as an obligation to 'fight for a cause'. Certain events that they experienced made them feel that they had the power to change the country.

"...then Reformasi came. So, we were like, "oh! Forget about school, let's go reformation!" ... You can see people's power. Even though you are a stranger, with all your fellow demonstrators, you feel the bonding together. So these were quite inspiring moments for young people like me at that time...there is a sense of duty to make the change for the country... The demonstrations made us feel that we can do something, to change." (Xiang, man, PKR, 31 years old)

Many of the participants agreed on "the sense of duty" to push for change in government policy, for the betterment of the country's citizens. The *Reformasi* Movements in 1998 had stirred up political aspiration and determination for some of the participants, to be actively involved in politics. This "calling" was one of the main reasons for choosing the path to join their respective political parties. Xiang's remarks were also loaded with frustrations against the ruling government, which were shared by many participants. Hence, they perceived that the parties would provide them with a platform in changing policies that could be more effective in helping society.

#### B. Men lead, Women Follow; Women as an Appendage?

The experiences of the participants reflected the different degrees of power, duties, and roles accorded to women and men. For the young men participants, being a leader was one of their roles as member, which came as a package with the decision making power, to gain trust and to create a good perception of their leadership. Despite being young, these men participants had been playing the role of leader, within the party.

But for the young women, even though they were devoted to their parties and had acquired political knowledge, many still perceived themselves as *followers*, and preferred to remain as mere members. For them, the decision making position would require them to be extraordinarily 'tough'. The perception of women as only being capable of vice positions was acute, especially within PAS.

"... So far, we do not have women as leaders in the main party or at the state levels... (they) only held the position as the vice. But these women, usually they are like the 'iron ladies', who are very strong." (Susila, woman, PAS, 38 years old)

Often, people argue that, due to the conservative nature of PAS, it is expected that the women members are deprived from holding decision making positions. But the PKR and DAP have shown that these patriarchal obstacles were inherited within their parties. In an attempt to encourage women to take leadership roles, PKR decided to allocate deputy posts to women candidates. This mutually understood allocation was well known amongst party members. This could imply that the highest positions that women members could attain, would be as deputies. DAP also shared a similar situation, where women were seen filling the vice positions.

The situation of all three parties has clearly shown that it is in fact the women, who were putting the glass ceiling above their heads. And this would cost other women, who were keen and actively involved in politics, as the glass ceiling formulated by women as well as men, would be even harder to penetrate.

#### C. Mobilisers; "Ice-breakers"; Recruiters

Due to the surprise win in the 2008 general election, many young people swarmed to become members of PR parties. Some women participants were seen to be eager to organise the orientation of these new young members, to give them more political knowledge and to sustain their interests with the party. They felt that their roles, as *mobilizers*, the "ice-breakers", and the party membership recruiters, was important to attract more people, to sustain the party memberships and to link the party to the grassroots. For example, PAS has a 'special force' called NISA, consisting of young women only. It is known as a non-political compartment of the party, and a channel to attract more young women into PAS, through various activities and public programmes. PKR and DAP do not have a similar 'special force' like NISA, but their young women members share similar roles as NISA members, busy organizing orientations and planning strategies to retain members and to publicize the party.

Only the young women members prefer to organise activities and do introductions for the new members. The party was merely granting them the chance. These women did not only confine their efforts as party recruiters, but they often presumed the responsibilities to educate other women members into having more awareness and confidence. Such as claiming those women's problems as women's responsibilities is problematic when they are imposing the restrictions on themselves as members. As a result, while women busied themselves with programmes to improve the status of women in politics or in society, men were busy honing their leadership skills.

#### D. Domestic vs Public Roles

In the past, opposition parties have often faced the dilemma of not having enough candidates to run in an

election campaign. According to the participants, leaders would have to resort to young and sometimes new members, in order to fill the seats. Out of the 27 young participants, 9 of them were assigned (by the party) to the task of running for the general election. They did not expect to win but were simply glad to be given the chance of getting first-hand experience in running for an election. These young men were willing to plunge into the contest.

Such a 'sense of adventure', however, was lacking amongst the young women participants. Some of these women rejected the offer because of the burden that they anticipated they would bear, if they were to win the election. Particularly for those women with families, there were other priorities, which were not uttered by the men.

*"Difficult! To win a seat as an assemblyperson, you would not be able to sit tight. All the problems from the people will come to you, from A to Z, and you have to take note of. You cannot just sit at home and do nothing. The positions come with lots of responsibilities. Problems in the village, the villagers... After all, they voted for you."* (Susila, woman, PAS, 33 years old)

In agreement to Susila, many married women participants did not want to jeopardize their duties at home, as wives and mothers. As a result, they had to turn down, what they saw as a burden (while men saw it as an opportunity), the chance to run as candidate in the general election.

To the men, those young women who wanted to participate actively in the party as the men did, would have to master the skill of time-management and the balance between home life and party life; the private and the public. This is simply because (as they claimed), men do not have women's natural multi-tasking capabilities.

*"I definitely can't be as good as my wife, in taking care of home. Women; they can do many things at the same time...I can't. I cannot think about my water bill, electricity bill at the same time as cooking, I can't. Women, probably they have a very special, I don't know what, biologically? A God given...I don't know what."* (Ahmad, PKR, 30 years old)

The views given by Ahmad reflected the discriminatory gendered norms, of the domestic roles and responsibilities of women. On one hand, men affirmed that women's roles were indeed important to the party and expressed their hopes that more women would participate actively in the party. But on the other hand, they still emphasized the importance of women's roles at home.

#### E. Being 'Young' and Being a 'Woman'

In general, all the participants agreed that women were seen to be committed and sensitive to issues and decision-making. Women were important for gathering votes and working with the grassroots. The fact that they formed almost half of the population, to marginalise them would mean to lose half of that strength for the party. However, this could also mean only establishing legitimacy of the party. For instance in PAS, its leaders appointed more women to run as candidates for the 12<sup>th</sup> general election, when compared to previous ones. But, as noted by one of the young PAS participants, PAS leaders were still sceptical

and reluctant to appoint young women onto the frontline during an election, as most of the young women in the party were inexperienced and unsuitable to enter the campaign. But this scepticism did not apply to the young men in PAS, who could also have had similarly little experience.

DAP and PKR opted for a joint youth wing in order to make equal political chances for both young men and women members. However, based on the experiences of young women participants from both parties, there are other underlying factors, and the basis of patriarchy hinders them from participating or continuing to participate actively in the party, such as the working environment of the party.

*"My eldest brother knows that politics can get quite busy sometimes, to go travel all the time, meeting until midnight, which not quite good for a girl. In politics, most of them are men, a lot of kind of people, you know."* (Jue, Woman, PKR, 28 years old)

Jue's remarks reflect the intimidation that might be faced by many young or new women party members. It reflects the gendered norms associated with society, which have caused the dichotomy of relations between men and women roles, which can also be one of the factors that regresses their political participation.

#### F. Balancing Personal, Professional, and Politics: The Juggler

All participants agreed that commitment was vital and only committed members would be noticed by leaders. Therefore, it seemed necessary for participants to play more than one role, in their daily lives. Besides their role as daughter or son, husband or wife, father or mother, some of them still worked full time on their private sector professions, while participating actively in the party's work. All participants failed to juggle their different roles. They were forced to make choices between their personal, professional, or political roles. Sacrifices were made in order for them to continue their political quests.

##### 1) Constraints on Professional Growth

As opposition parties, the PR alliance often faced the problem of a lack of resources and required members to work voluntarily for the party. Therefore, most of them had to juggle their commitments to the party, whilst trying not to lose their jobs. After the general election in 2008, the demands on the elected candidates, to concentrate more on their respective constituencies, caused dilemmas for them in their careers, which they could not afford to lose. As explained by Ong, both his profession and his politics, serve different purpose in his life.

*"...I may lose in the coming election; I may not stand, so I don't have the YB's allowance. So what is my income? My (law) firm. If I don't have a stable income through my firm, meaning after 5 years, if I lose or I am not a candidate, I will face financial problems."* (Ong, Man, PKR. 32 years old)

In order to cope with both responsibilities, Ong's daily routine was divided between his political duty as a state assemblyman and as a lawyer. Despite the fact that he was married, with his wife conceiving his first child at the time of his interview, there was no mention of juggling his time to be

at home. Most of the young men were of the same opinion as Ong. Their jobs, which involved serving society, demanded them to be on a 'standby mode' all of the time. They were more willing to devote their time to the party's work and their career, whilst being less concerned with their roles at home.

*"I am very ashamed to say that my wife plays a bigger role than me in my daughter's education. She teaches my daughter to write, to pronounce ABC... I only play a little role. This is because I don't have enough time to teach my daughter. Of course, the normal operation of our family is also done by my wife lah. (Tan, Man, DAP, 38 years old)*

Sacrifices were easier to make, when they had "others" to help "cover" their roles at home; who were often their own family members. It seemed that for men like Tan, the choice to focus on the party was simpler to make, because of the presumption that their wives would always be available. They expected their wives to understand their situations, after all - this is what the wife had signed up for, when she had agreed with the marriage. This presumption made it harder for women to actively participate in the party. From all of the women participants, only two of them revealed that they had the luxury of support from their family members, such as their mothers or sisters, to replace their role as mother to their children.

2) *"To be or not to be": Having to Sacrifice Political Activism in the Party*

Priorities set by many of the men participants were different from the young women. Susila had been with the party for more than ten years. She perceived politics as being part of her religion and hence her life, but she would still choose to make sure that her role at home was well taken care of, before she pursued the party's work. In order to not neglect her roles and responsibilities at home, she confessed that she had rejected offers from party leaders, to hold higher positions within the party. On discussing her daily routine;

*"Every day before I take off to do my party's work, I will make sure that the household chores are done and my children are already taken care of before I start my work for the party. But every day I will be sure to allocate at least an hour for the party's work." (Susila, Woman, PAS, 38 years old)*

Susila explained that her husband is supporting her and children fully, while she was not working, but committed herself to the party's work voluntarily. Therefore, she stressed that her husband's permission to be involved actively in the party's work, was very important for her. She recalled the number of times that she had rejected offers from party leaders to hold decision making positions within the party, or to run as a candidate in general elections, because she was wary of the commitment that would be required from her. Susila's careful selection of party work is one of the contributing factors, to the number of drop-outs by young women from the party. Young single women, felt obliged to remain single to be able to focus on their political careers. Otherwise, they hoped that their future husbands would be more understanding and accepting of their rights to be in politics.

Based on these findings, even though women theoretically have the freedom to commit to other roles and responsibilities within the public sphere, they are still expected to give priority to their roles at home, in the private sphere. Hoskins (2003) highlighted the seriousness of such perceptions, especially the young people who already demonstrate a sense of apathy or disengagement in politics, are often those at home, have little chances to learn about democratic processes or to engage in political issues (Hoskins, 2003).

G. *Does reformed party structure help?*

The results so far, show clearly that the combination of both young men and women members, in the same wing, did not necessarily imply that the issue of gender segregations in the party is solved. It is important to consider the nature of patriarchy, which is usually inherent in the political system. For instance, even though PKR launched a policy for having at least 30% women in leadership positions in the party, thus heeding the call by CEDAW and the Beijing conference 1995, young women participants still express their observations that it was difficult to juggle their 'gender' identity.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Structural obstacles, including institutional constraints, lack of resources, financial and other restrictions, because of domestic and caring activities and codification of politics as a traditionally men domain, have all been identified as hindrances to women's political participation. Many scholars have highlighted the fact that women's positions are balanced "on marginal structures of the political system, with women's social and political organizations being appendages to the political system, rather than strong viable forces of their own" (Wazir, 1982). Manderson (1980) noted the unchanged fundamental domestic roles of women members, even though they had been official members and had participated directly in the political parties (Manderson, 1980).

Many recent studies show that the situation of women in politics has not changed much over the years. In this study, for example, gender roles and responsibilities are still seen as women's job and thus, confined women to the private sphere. In fact, looking at the current era of rapid developments, women's roles have widened, and the intersections of their roles with norms, and values with the gendered system, are getting more complex. Now, women not only have to juggle their domestic roles, but they must also go out to work, either out of choice or through necessity. Moreover, when the young men participants justified women's multiple roles and responsibilities as 'a God's gift'; on one hand, the remark showed that men are aware of the burdens of women's daily lives; on the other, they also justified those burdens as being the 'biological role' of a woman. Therefore, it is only right for women to master the 'art-of-balancing' between their domestic roles, career, and politics.

Holding multiple roles, both in private and public, may impose heavier burdens on women; and therefore, less time to think about politics. As was repeatedly highlighted in the findings, not only are women's capacities brought into question, but also their political commitments. It was obvious from the interviews that women had to give priority to their children and the household, as expected by the societal norms, before they could consider working for the party. A few women, felt justified by their firm religious beliefs that women had to get permission from their husbands to join political party. The superiority of the husband's role was enhanced with the capability of husbands to provide financial support, which was remarked on by several participants, as one of the important resources in political participation. Such financial support has helped to define the power relationships between women and their spouses, and these women would often feel the obligation to put their husbands as their first priority, before they can be politically active in the party.

The reformed political party's structure alone is insufficient, to result in gender equity and equality, within the party system. Much more work needs to be done to eliminate gender biases and stereotypes within the party and to also educate the public, on the need to support young women in politics. Manderson (1980) stressed the importance of doing political research, by looking at the social and cultural settings where women and men are located. These settings may determine the degree of political participation of both women and men (Waylen, 1996). Moreover, studies have highlighted the vital influences of political socialization on young people's early lives (Quintelier, 2007, Quéniart, 2008).

## V. CONCLUSION

PR's attempt to set up a new youth structure with combined membership of both young men and women members into the same party might appear to be a pioneering move in Malaysia's political party's structure. However, having both young men and women in the same youth wing, has been shown to be inadequate in facilitating women's participation. More needs to be done to deal with gender related issues.

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