Women Political Candidates—The Malaysian Media and Their Concerns[*]

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Globally, women now play a key role in economic, political, and social cultural affairs, and Malaysia is no exception. Equitable representation by women in the political arena is viewed as crucial in the improvement of women's participation in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, though women have made and make great contributions in both the private and public spheres, a review of media's coverage of women in the public realm shows a strong tendency to relegate women to mainly domestic affairs. This is consistent with findings from studies on women political candidates' image during campaign issues that showed that though women candidates attempted to present themselves in decisive and assertive ways, gender stereotyping was dominant in the media agenda and persistent biases typical of traditional gender representations in the media prevailed. There is very little research in Malaysia on how the media frames women candidates during campaign periods, or what issues are aligned with women candidates. The construction of images of women political candidates, in particular, is often omitted in most research on the General Election. This study analyses how women candidates were covered in selected Malaysian newspapers in the 2008 General Election. The types of issues women political candidates are identified with in the newspapers are also analysed.

Keywords: women, political candidates, malaysia, media, general election

Introduction

The results of the 2008 General Election, which saw five of the 14 states of Malaysia go to the opposition coalition for the first time, brought up several issues for debate in both social and scholarly circles. First, both the political parties, the Barisan Nasional (BN) (National Front) and the opposition parties, which later formed the People's Coalition or Pakatan Rakyat (PR) (People's Alliance) had internal difficulties within and among their respective coalition parties on matters pertaining to leadership and division of power issues. In addition, there was a perceptible shift in the centres of power and authority in the respective ruling parties in several states—Perlis, Terengganu, Penang, and Perak. Second, there were questions about the perceived lack of efficiency of the government in several areas. These included the government's inability to satisfy the fundamental needs of the people; an erosion in the credibility of government institutions such as

the police and the judiciary; and a dismal record mismanagement of national funds. Third, voters expressed discontent with the BN, and a preference for multiculturalism in leadership, government and politics. Fourth, the unbalanced reporting in the mainstream media (print and electronic), which was also seen as part of government machinery during the campaign period as well as after the election, led to further erosion in the government's credibility. The electorate's increased reliance on the internet, mobile telephones, Short Message Service (SMS) and other online media for alternative information on election issues also increased dramatically.

One issue that did not receive sufficient attention, especially from the media, was the presence by women candidates. Not only has the mainstream and "alternative" media marginalized discussion on the poor representation of women candidates fielded by the political parties, but also given only limited visibility to the few women candidates running for election in their coverage. In addition, there seemed to be stereotypical depiction of the women political candidates. This point has been raised primarily by women activists and leaders and generally ignored by the majority male political leaders and the media in nations almost everywhere. This paper thus examines how the print media covers and depicts women political candidates in the 12th Malaysian General Election. It also discusses the types of issues women political candidates are associated with in the newspapers.

Malaysian General Election 2008

The General Election is held every five years. In preparation of the 2008 General Election, the Parliament was dissolved on 13th February, 2008, and the Election Commission set the nomination date for 24th February, 2008 with the general polling date for 8th March, 2008. All state assemblies were dissolved except that of Sarawak, which had held its election the previous year. Candidates were fielded for 222 Parliament seats and 505 state assembly seats.

The 2004 General Election saw the ruling BN coalition gain a landslide victory (90% of parliament seats) partly due to the "feel good" factor created by the then newly-installed Prime Minister Dato' Sri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who succeeded Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad after the latter's 22-year reign. However, the 2008 election, dubbed as Malaysia's "political tsunami" and the "perfect storm" (Chye, 2008), dealt a crushing blow to BN as it was denied the two-thirds majority it had continuously held since 1969. The BN won only 50.6% of the overall popular votes, and in peninsular Malaysia, it actually lost the popular vote by a narrow margin. There was a 70% turnout for the 11 million registered voters (Raviechandren, 2008). Although the BN coalition held onto a Parliamentary majority of 63% by winning 140 out of 222 seats and was able to form the next government, it suffered its worst election result in 40 years with a defeat in several key constituencies. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Gerakan parties, in particular, suffered heavy losses with only three wins for MIC and two for Gerakan. In fact, both the presidents—Datuk Seri Samy Vellu and Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon respectively—lost their seats to the Opposition. The Opposition won 82 seats (see Table 1).

In addition, the Opposition wrestled five of the 13 states from the incumbent ruling coalition in the state elections. Apart from Kelantan, already under opposition rule in 2004, the Opposition also won the states of

Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor, the latter three being among the most developed and coveted states in the country.

Table 1

Election Results for Parliamentary and State Seats for Years 2004 and 2008

Political Party	Parliamentary Seats Won		Percent of Seats Won		State Seats Won		Percent of Seats Won	
	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008
Barisan Nasional	198	140	90.4	63.1	453	314	89.7	62.2
Pakatan Rakyat	20	82	9.1	36.9	51	191	10.1	37.8
Independent	1	0	0.5	0	1	0	0.2	0
Total	219	222	100	100	505	505	100	100

Several factors led to BN's dismal performance in the 2008 General Election. Merdeka Centre, an opinion research firm, conducted a survey to gauge public sentiments about the election and found the main issues raised during the election campaign were inflation, shortage of goods, fuel subsidies, rising crime, rising cost of living, mismanagement, corruption, the demand for a free and fair election by a group of non-governmental organizations and political parties under the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election (BERSIH), racial equality especially as highlighted by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), and the Lingam video clip case and inquiry by the Royal Commission of Inquiry. Anger among ethnic Indians regarding issues such as religion, rights and widespread feelings of loss of dignity also played a role in heating up the debates and discussions prior to the election (http:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian-general-election-2008#seats, retrieved on 15th May, 2009).

Women in the 2008 General Election

Globally women have contributed to all aspects of politics, economic and social. Equitable representation by women in politics is now considered crucial to improve women's participation in decision-making. Malaysia, as a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), needs to ensure that women hold 30% of decision-making positions in all sectors, especially in politics. In the 2008 Malaysian General Election, women held only 8.2% of the parliament and state seats.

UNESCO views communication as an important tool in the promotion of women's responsible participation in a nation's development. The lack of media gender sensitization and stereotyping is partly blamed for the absence of women in top decision-making positions in various sectors.

Though women have made tremendous contributions in both the private and public spheres, the media continues to emphasize women's role as home makers. Senator Hillary Clinton, for instance, had her Senate campaign in 2003 fixed in domesticity by the media (Dubriwny, 2003). Similarly, media interest in Angela Merkel, Germany's first woman head of government, brought attention to her hairstyle, makeup and dress as well as her family life (Ferre, 2006). In fact, a substantial body of research that has so far examined women political candidates' images through an analysis of messages and campaign issues showed that though women candidates tried to present themselves in decisive and assertive terms, gender stereotyping was still very much present in the media (Sullivan, 1998). Persistent biases typical of traditional gender representations in the media prevailed (Lemish & Tidhar, 1999). Consistent framing attributes include: an escort for her husband, a protocol

leader, a fashion trend-setter, a possible policy advocate, and a supporter of charitable works (Anderson, 2002; Kalyango & Winfield, 2009).

The "schema" of traditional gender representations includes the stereotypes of dependency roles (mothers, daughters and wives of men), as well as traits such as compassion, warmth, honesty, passivity and emotionality (ibid). The contention here is that while these stereotypes are not all offensive, they are unfair, particularly when male politicians were viewed as possessing strengths such as independence, ambitiousness, objectivity, leadership and aggression (ibid). Regardless of whether the research is on images of women political candidates in the print or electronic media, the findings are common in that the media framed women politicians more in the private sphere.

One of the methods frequently used by the media to stereotype women in traditional feminine roles is through media framing. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, causal interpretation or moral evaluation (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Chan and Lee (1999), for example, in their research on media coverage of protest groups, found that news stories about protests tend to focus on the protestors' appearances, rather than their issues, emphasized their violent actions, rather than social criticisms, and pit them against the police, rather than their intended targets. Similarly, images of women political candidates are framed (often called schema/schemata) within the context of stereotypical images. Thus, the media will continue to portray Hillary Clinton, Gloria Arroyo Macapagal, Angela Merkel and Helen Clark, not only as forceful and capable women, but also frame them in traditionally feminine stereotypes. Closer to home, a cursory glance at media's treatment of women's images showed that a similar schemata is used for women politicians like Datuk Sri Sharizat Jalil, Datuk Sri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Sri Azalina Othman Said. Also, the media framed the image of the women by discussing their activities mostly in specific women's columns or pages rather than in general news columns. A study in Israel conducted by Hertzog, for instance, made special emphasis on candidates being females and that their involvement in politics was presented as a threat to their femininity and to their roles as mothers and wives (Lemish & Tidhar, 1999).

Media can frame contributions by women political leaders strategically to encourage increased participation of women in politics. However, there is very little research in Malaysia on how media frames women candidates during the campaign period, or what issues are aligned with women candidates. The construction of images of women political candidates, in particular, is often omitted in most research on the General Election. There is an urgent need to examine if this may be an obstacle to achieving CEDAW's proposed benchmark of 30% female representation in politics.

Table 2 shows the dismal performance of the women candidates. A total of 128 women from all parties/Independents were nominated to run for parliamentary and state seats in the 2008 General Election (48 Parliament, 80 State), that is, a total of 8.2% women candidates. The largest number of women candidates fielded was 29 in Selangor, 15 in Perak and 14 in Penang (*New Straits Times*, August 8, 2008).

Several women's groups have advocated for greater participation of women in Malaysian politics. The Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) has a 10-point citizen's manifesto that fully supports gender issues such as elimination of sexism in Parliament and the need for stronger sexual harassment legislation. WCI is a civil society initiative bringing together women and men who want to see civil society involved in the process to push the democratic boundaries, yet remain independent of political affiliations.

Table 2

Number of Women Candidates Fielded in the 2004 and 2008 General Election

Political Party	Parliament Seats Contested	State Seats Contested	No. of Women Candidates		Total No. of Parliament Seats Contested	Total No. of State Seats Contested	Total No. of State Seats Contested		% of Women Candidates
	2008	2008	2004	2008	2008	2008	2004	2008	
Barisan Nasional									
UMNO	10	30	35	40	117	336		453	8.8
MCA	7	9	12	16	40	91		131	12.2
GERAKAN	1	2	3	3	12	30		42	7.1
MIC	1	2	2	3	9	19		28	10.7
PBB	2		1	2	14			14	14.3
PBS		1	1	1	4	13		17	5.9
SAPP	1	1	1	2	3	5		8	25.0
Opposition									
DAP	8	11	10	19	46	101		147	12.9
PAS	7	8	9	15	68	233		301	5.0
PKR	9	15	15	24	96	177		273	8.8
Independent	2	1	2	3	32	53		85	3.5
Others					33	36		69	0.0
Total	48	80	94	128	474	1094	1564*	1568	8.2

Note. Source: Collected by the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) from various newspaper reports—*New Straits Times*, *The Star*, and *The Sun*, 25 Feb, 2008; *New Straits Times*, 25 March, 2004. Retrieved 13 May, 2009 from www.thestar.com.my/election/results/candidates.html. Abbreviations: UMNO—United Malays National Organisation; MCA—Malaysian Chinese Association; DAP—Democratic Action Party; PAS—Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party); PKR—Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party).

Problem Statement

Women comprise almost half of the registered voters, but their participation in politics is under-represented; Currently less than 10% of all Members of Parliament are women (Mohamed, 2008). Thus far, women's participation in electoral politics seems to be limited to mobilizing voters (Puteri UMNO, for instance, and all the women's wings of all political parties have been seen to be very involved in this aspect of elections). However, their involvement in more pertinent areas, for example, to be fielded as election candidates and to be involved in decision-making is sorely lacking. Although there was an improvement in the women's candidacy nomination in the 2008 Election (an increase from 94 in 2004 to 128 in 2008), this still falls short of the recommended 30% quota for women in decision-making positions.

Though women everywhere have made tremendous strides in many spheres of life (politics, finance, economy, science), the media continue to cast them in the domestic realm, focus on them as mothers and wives, and on their dress-sense. This was quite apparent in the coverage of women candidates in the Malaysian media during the run-up to the 2008 Election, where such coverage was at the expense of discussing more salient issues, which should have been the order of the day to help voters to make informed and intelligent decisions about the candidates.

Media Role in the Electoral Process

A review of the literature on the media in the electoral process shows that much has been researched on the role of the media in elections. Many researchers from the various public and private universities and colleges in Malaysia (including Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, International Islamic University of Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and Olympia College) have studied the role of the media before, during and after the elections. Among the areas studied include content analysis of outdoor advertising that investigates the promotional techniques and appeals used by political parties during the campaign; the role of the media in influencing the selection of candidates; the role and influence of the Internet, SMS and blogs as an alternative source of information; and a content analysis of selected newspapers, radio and television programs on the issues/themes and personalities frequently covered and the story slant taken by the media on the issues/themes and personalities.

The topics for research on the role of the media in the electoral process are recurring themes being studied in almost all elections by researchers in the various public and private universities and colleges. Nevertheless, among what is lacking is research on gender-related issues, studies on women political candidates, campaign issues highlighted and new media usage by the women. Hence, this paper attempts to address this gap by studying how women candidates were depicted and the issues they are associated with in selected newspapers.

Because the mainstream media in Malaysia are either owned by the ruling parties or managed by companies closely associated to the ruling government, the media are seen to be partisan and used as vehicles to voice the latter's aspirations. This has contributed to the media losing credibility in the eyes of the public, particularly among the younger generation, who now prefer to seek news and information via the Internet and the social media.

Although there is no conclusive evidence to show whether media has a major influence on the voting behaviour of voters, the media, particularly the "new" media, do play a significant role in the electoral process. The popular blogs and social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube, were not only used as campaigning tools, but provided alternative news to the public (Wong, 2008). Compared to the BN candidates who largely ignored the importance of the Internet and relied on the print and electronic media, the opposition wisely and widely used the new media technologies, even to the extent of raising funds through the websites and blogs to help them print campaign posters and hold public fora.

Objectives

This paper thus has the following objectives: To identify the type of newspaper coverage on women political candidates in the 2008 General Election; to analyze how women political candidates were depicted in selected Malaysian newspapers; and to examine the types of issues women political candidates are associated with in the selected newspapers.

Methodology

The primary method used in this research was through a qualitative content analysis of selected newspaper coverage. The qualitative approach allows for flexible organizing, analyzing and making sense of the data collected. News items on women candidates campaigning for state and parliamentary seats in the 2008 General Election were analysed for the way these women were framed in them.

Several scholars have studied the framing of feminizing attributes (Ferree & Gamson, 2003; Kalyango & Winfield, 2009). The concept of framing in newspapers is explained as a function of choices and selection made by news reporters and editors, as they attempt to make sense of events and situations (Gamson, 1992). According to Ott and Aoki (2002), journalists include and exclude issues and highlight inherent biases or partiality in their coverage of issues and personalities thereby highlighting certain frames that reflect mainstream political viability and character of candidates (cited in Kalyango & Winfield, 2009).

A guided coding form was used to record the categories of frames used in each newspaper story. A modified version of categories and their explanations were adapted from an international study, the Global Media Monitoring Project 2005 report[2], on certain tendencies or patterns in news coverage—from the worst to the best revolving around at least five story types. Several coders fluent in the English, Malay, Chinese or Tamil languages, were briefed on how to code these stories. The coders identified the news stories according to four types of stories. There was a briefing on how to fill the coding form with a pilot test for five stories from the English newspaper, since all the coders were fluent in that language. This allowed the coders to have similar understanding on the concepts to analyze.

A purposive sample of seven English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil daily newspapers was selected for the study. Since the ethnic based political parties are generally given extensive coverage by newspapers of their respective language, it seemed important to examine the coverage in the more widely read newspapers of the different languages, namely, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil besides the English newspapers read by the urban and professional Malaysians. This sample thus included: three English daily newspapers—*New Straits Times, The Star, The Sun*; two Malay daily newspapers—*Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian*; one Chinese daily newspaper—*Sin Chew Daily*; and one Tamil daily newspaper—*Malaysia Nanban,* including their Sunday editions except for *The Sun*, which only had weekday publications. A total of 1,052 stories made up the sample. The period of data collection was from 15 February, 2008 until 16 March, 2008, that is from when the parliament was dissolved and for the weeks of the campaign period as well as one week after the General Election, a total of 30 days.

A qualitative analysis was done of all the stories covering women politicians and those women contesting for either the parliamentary or state seats in this election. It needs to be noted at the outset that how the women political candidates were covered in the newspapers is probably the result of (1) the women candidates themselves, and/or (2) the framing and slant given by the newspapers. For the former, newspapers covered what the women political candidates themselves emphasized, such as social or economic issues or those pertaining to women. The main focus and concern of this study, though, is the coverage and treatment given of women political candidates by the newspapers.

The Type of Newspaper Coverage on Women Political Candidates in the Malaysian General Election 2008

This section analyszs the different aspects of newspaper coverage: The type of story, whether the main characters were the source or the news item, type of picture used in the story and treatment of story. There were a total of 1,052 stories in the sample for this study on women candidates in the seven selected newspapers.

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[2] Global Media Monitoring Project 2005 is an annual international research project on media conducted by WACC.

There were 568 stories in *Sin Chew Daily*, 182 in the *New Straits Times*, 109 in *The Star,* 59 in *Berita Harian*, 53 in *Utusan Malaysia*, 52 in *Malaysia Nanban*, and 29 in *The Sun*.

The number of stories is not necessarily reflective of the importance or emphasis given by the different newspapers to a particular issue or event related to women candidates as some stories were written as extensive features or news reports while others were just fillers. The English and Chinese newspapers had more stories related to women candidates and issues pertinent to women compared to the Malay and Indian newspapers in the sample.

Six categories were classified to identify the story type: editorial, news story, letter to the editor, feature, picture and blogs. A majority of the stories (85%) were written as news stories (894 of the total 1,052 stories), which chronicle the *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* of the women candidates. A typical news story would name the woman candidate, provide some general information like her age and marital status and where she was contesting. Table 3 shows the newspapers mostly carried news stories, with *Sin Chew Daily* having 482 news stories of its total 568 stories; the *New Straits Times* having 155 news stories of 189 stories; and *Malaysia Nanban* having 50 news stories of 52 stories.

Table 3

Types of Story Covered in Newspapers

Story type	Newspaper									
	NewStraits Times	The Star	The	Sun	Utusan Malaysia	Berita Harian	Sin Daily	Chew Malaysia Nanban	Total	%
Editorial	1	0	1	0	2	43	0	47	4.5
News Story	155	96	25	31	55	482	50	894	85
Letter to Editor	3	1	0	0	0	10	0	14	1.3
Feature	1	6	1	22	2	23	2	57	5.5
Picture	16	2	1	0	0	4	0	23	2.2
Blog	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	0.5
Other	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.1
Missing	6	4	1	0	0	0	0	11	1
Total	182	109	29	53	59	568	52	1052	100

Editorials, which are articles of comments or opinions usually with a slant or bias orientation, were not a common story type in any of the newspapers in their coverage of women candidates. Only *Sin Chew Daily* carried 43 of its 568 stories on the editorial pages, while the other newspapers had only one or two editorial type stories on them or none. The editorials discussed the women's candidature and their contributions to the respective political parties and the society. They were said to have gained the trust of the party leaders enough to be fielded in the election.

What was lacking in the news stories was elaborated upon in the features. There were altogether 57 features on the women candidates, with *Utusan Malaysia* (22 out of 53 stories) and *Sin Chew Daily* (23 of 568 stories) having the most number of features. In addition, the respective newspaper showed its communal or race-based orientation here where the Malay newspapers focused on the Malay women candidates while the Chinese newspaper focused on the Chinese women candidates and the Indian newspaper on the Indians. A typical slant often taken in the feature was that of the woman candidate having gained the trust and confidence of the party leadership as well as the "restu" (blessings) of her husband and family to run as a candidate.

Also, several stories on women candidates in the newspapers were picture stories with a short caption. The *New Straits Times* had 16 out of its 189 stories in this sample as picture stories. The pictures in the *New Straits Times* on the women candidates usually showed them on the campaign trail accompanied by their husbands, fathers or other family members (for example, Datuk Sri Sharizat Jalil, Datuk Noraini Ahmad, Nurul Izzah Ibrahim and Datin Sri Dr Wan Azizah). It was also typical for the women candidates to be pictured meeting the public at the markets or with vendors. This appeared to be similar in the other language dailies too.

Depiction of Women Candidates in Selected Malaysian Newspapers

Stereotyping was visible in the language, tone, and slant of reporting on women candidates in news stories and headlines in all the different language newspapers—English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. When covering women political candidates, it is common for the Malay newspapers to mention the marital status of the candidates. Though this is useful as readers would like to know who their candidates are, nevertheless the newspapers' tendency to often state that the candidates (particularly Malay candidates) get the "restu" (blessings) of their husbands and children is deemed unnecessary. This is seen as perpetuating a stereotype that a woman's involvement in the public arena needs to be legitimated by blessings or *restu* of the husband and children. While this is more common in the Malay newspapers, it is also an angle taken by the English newspapers when the candidates are depicted to have "the support of the family". Almost all women candidates (Zainab Nasir, Song Choy Leng, Nurul Izzah, Halimah Sadique, and Noraini Ahmad, to name a few in the newspapers) were reported to receive blessings and permission (*mendapat restu dan izin*) from their husbands, their children, and/or other family members. In comparison, there was rarely any mention of the male candidate "requiring" such blessings. This can be seen as a subtle stereotype by the media. Sometimes the women themselves emphasized such blessing and approval, probably as a conditioning of thinking it was necessary to seek it. "I have my family's blessings. I want Malaysians to know that PAS encourages women to stand as candidates" (Siti Meriam Naam, PAS candidate nominee, *The Star*, 15 February, 2008).

In addition, the newspapers, when reporting about women candidates on their walkabout during the election campaign, often specifically mentioned their husbands, children or fathers who accompanied them. This appeared in the stories as well as in headlines as shown in the examples below.

(1) "Go-go Shahrizat gets her family on the go, too" (*New Straits Times*, 29 February, 2008)

(2) "Latipah's family is her pillar of strength" (*New Straits Times*, 29 February 2008).

Reporters also emphasized the marital status and/or the challenges facing married women candidates while generally it was not seen as something to report for the male candidates, which can be viewed as stereotyping. Examples of such news items are as follows:

(1) Nurul Izzah as a possible candidate was described as the mother of a five-month old baby girl who said she would need to balance her role as mother and politician.

(2) "Mum on campaign trail makes time for her young children" (in a story on Christina Teoh Ai Ling) (*The Star,* 4 February, 2008).

(3) "Pregnant Teo Yin Chong to contest" (*Sin Chew Daily,* 25 February, 2008).

(4) "Hubby does double duty in family act" (DAP Dr Teo Eng Ching's husband was reported to help her cope with her campaign and pregnancy) (New Straits Times, 4 March, 2008).

The single status of the women also seemed to be of great interest in the media reports on women candidates. The most blatant coverage was done by *Mingguan Malaysia* with the headline *Cinta vs Politik,* or "Love vs Politics" (17 February, 2008), which devoted two pages on four single women (and one male) political candidates. The weekend edition deemed it necessary to focus on how Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun's, Dato' Sri Azalina Othman Said's, Teresa Kok's and Rosnah Rashid Shirlin's political careers have compelled them to put their love lives on the back-burner. For example, Dato' Sri Azalina Othman Said's (UMNO candidate) single status was highlighted in a story on *Kempen Cari Jodoh Azalina (*a campaign to look for a life partner for Azalina*) (Utusan Malaysia*, 25 February, 2008).

Women's physical image and demeanour is almost always of interest; the newspapers did not fail the readers and rose to that occasion. The *New Straits Times* too, deemed it important to discuss how some of the women political candidates are not just beautiful but are also intelligent (When beauty and brains go together on campaign trail, 4 March, 2008. Nancy Shukri is described as having *demure celebrity looks*, Dato' Sri Shahrizat is *a looker herself* and S. Kanageswari's *gentle looks have attracted the hearts of many single male voters in their 30s.* There are numerous examples in both the English and Malay newspapers where the news space is devoted to how women political candidates look and behave. The following are some examples:

(1) An Utusan Malaysia writer ridiculed Nurul Izzah (PKR candidate) by describing her as behaving like a religious teacher… "as if she is the last and only Malay woman left with traditional courteous characteristics" (translated from lagak seorang ustazah...ciri kesopanan seperti dialah Perempuan Melayu Terakhir)(Utusan Malaysia, 29 February, 2008).

(2) Maimun Yusuf (an Independent candidate who is a grandmother of senior years) was constantly referred to as Nenek Mun, Tok Mun or Grandma Mun or Grandmother Mun (in all the newspapers).

(3) Dr Najihatussalehah (PAS candidate) was described as a female (with a) healing touch for victory (*The Star,* 17 February, 2008).

(4) Dato' Sri Shahrizat Jalil (UMNO candidate) was described as being dressed in a white polka dot "baju kurung", and as having a calm and poised demeanour (*The Star,* 25 February, 2008).

(5) Dato' Sri Shahrizat Jalil (UMNO candidate) was described as constantly portraying feminine characteristics… "sweetly controlling her laughter…character of the daughter of an Indian Muslim…Sharizat who can attract/woo" (translated from sifat kewanitaan sentiasa diserlahkan…gelak tawa cuba dikawal dengan manis...karektor anak maminya…Shahrizat yang menawan hati) (Berita Harian, 21 February, 2008).

(6) Jenice Lee (DAP candidate) was reported upon as she may look demure and small in size, but when she speaks…she means business (*The Star*, 25 February, 2008).

(7) Datin Sri Dr. Wan Azizah (PKR candidate) was described to have hardly changed over the years…still reticent in her speech…her complexion flawless and expression serene no matter how great the issues and pressure around her (*The Sta*r, 4 March, 2008).

The fashion style of women candidates was also presented as a concern of the media in their reports, taking the focus away from more serious issues. There were articles reporting on how long it takes them to groom themselves to meet the people, with pictures, for example of Carol Chew drinking green tea to look good and Hannah Yeoh putting on make-up—generally of them looking beautiful and keeping in style. While Elizabeth Wong was depicted as a talented young lady who has potential in politics, she was also presented as someone who likes fashion.

(1) "Ladies do battle in style" (an article about Carol Chew, an MCA candidate, and Hannah Yeoh, a DAP candidate) (*The Star,* 7 March, 2008)

(2) "Siapa cantik Siapa hebat" (translated as Who's pretty, who's dynamic)

(3) "Munaliza sports a slimmer look, Taman Medan candidate is no loser despite shedding extra pounds" (*The Star,* 7 March, 2008).

Chinese newspapers in particular, tend to describe women as delectable items—as vegetables and other food items. Stereotypical terms used to describe the Chinese women political candidates included *cili padi, pepper* and *bee hoon.* For example, Fong and several other Chinese female candidates were repeatedly referred to as *cili padi* (a small chilly that is pungently hot) in both the Chinese newspapers. Such descriptions also appeared in *The Star* (18 February, 2008). The Chinese culturally tend to use food to describe individuals, including in the Chinese media. However, some terms, such as *cili padi* are mostly used only to describe women who are seen to be dynamic. Below are a few examples of such descriptions.

(1) Teo Nie Ching is popularly called "Cili Padi Serdang" (*Sin Chew Daily,* 23 February, 2008).

(2) Public attended because of popularity, "Cili padi" received overwhelming response (*Sin Chew Daily,* 29 February, 2008).

(3) Fried Bee Hoon with pepper added will be more delicious? (*Sin Chew Daily,* 25 March, 2008).

Other stereotypical sexist terminology not seen in reporting about male candidates but was used in reference to women candidates in the Chinese media were "lady fight" and "lady country", as shown in the examples below.

(1) "Lady fight"—DAP puts 6 non-Chinese women candidates *(Sin Chew Daily,* 25 February, 2008).

(2) At the other side of "lady country" (*Sin Chew Daily,* 3 March, 2008).

There were cases when the women candidates were also shown to be emotionally weak and unable to withstand the pressure and rigours of campaigning. For example, Po Kuan was shown crying on the front page of *New Straits Times* with the headline: "Po Kuan cries off".

Several newspapers also picked up on the controversial billboard put up by BN on Teresa Kok who was standing for election in two constituencies—Seputeh and Kirara. The billboard depicts Kok as a promiscuous woman with two "darlings". The media further perpetuated this image nationwide when they decided to print the photograph.

All the examples above can be viewed as blatant stereotyping by reporters, which trivialize the ability of women in politics and reduce their capabilities by focusing on their physical looks, demeanour and marital status. Even if such coverage was done tongue-in-cheek, or good-naturedly or merely to break the boredom of discussions on serious issues during an election campaign, it should not be condoned if women hope to be taken seriously in the political arena and the public sphere.

Types of Issues Women Political Candidates Are Associated With in

Malaysian Newspapers

Much of the coverage on women political candidates was merely to inform voters and readers on where they were contesting, against whom and had very little to do with what issues they were defending or propagating.

In the coverage of the women political candidates, constant references were made about them being mothers and wives, which not only underscore traditional gender roles but also re-inscribe the dichotomy

between the feminine and masculine as explained by Anderson (2002). More importantly, it takes readers' attention away from more pertinent issues. Readers and voters would have benefited more had the focus been on what the candidates have done or plan to do for the betterment of the community. When the media continue to reinforce women's roles as mothers and wives, they are negating or downplaying the many other positions that women occupy in the public sphere.

Generally, there was very poor coverage on what the women stood for and the issues they were defending. There could be several reasons for this. Did the media ignore women's stand on issues? Did the women make no visible stand on the issues? Or, were the issues considered "sensitive" or controversial that the media did not cover them (such as issues concerning ethnic interest like vernacular school education, which can be a racially charged issue).

Not surprisingly, issues of concern that were most highlighted in news stories about the women candidates were social issues. These included their concerns about security, infrastructure, schools and places of worship in residential areas, single mothers and employment. The women candidates were also shown to be concerned with issues on education, especially the Chinese and Indian candidates, who were defending the vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools and the need for more attention on them.

A few candidates, for example BN candidate Shahrizat, were sometimes shown to be involved in social issues like poverty and poor housing in their respective constituencies. Other concerns were regarding marginalised groups (such as the disabled) and gangsterism. Several DAP candidates, including Lim So Kien, were portrayed as being concerned about the escalating cost of living. Indian women candidates were portrayed to be mainly concerned about single mothers, poverty, the pitiful state of Tamil schools and education, crime, inequality, and the demolition of Hindu temples (in Klang) (Malaysia Nanban, 19 February, 2008; 10 March, 2008). The lack of job opportunities for youth and poor road access to estates, for example, was brought up by an Indian DAP woman candidate, D. Kamache, during her campaign. Such articles had headlines like the following:

(1) "Usual rounds at the market, looking into security and drainage issues faced by residents" (About Chew Mei Fun of MCA) (*The Star,* 22 February, 2008).

(2) "Minimum wage promise" (About Wan Azizah of PKR) (*The Star,* 27 February, 2008).

(3) "Make Selangor, state with highest crime rate in country, a safer place" (about Elizabeth Wong of PKR) (*The Star,* 29 February, 2008).

(4) "More schools on campaign rounds in Selangor" (about Norshima Hashim) (*The Star,* 4 March, 2008).

Besides the community and social based issues, women candidates were seldom projected to be concerned about other serious mainstream issues. Women candidates, to a lesser extent, were reported to have raised concerns regarding economic progress and the need for better preservation of the environment. Some DAP and other opposition candidates advocated for good governance and freedom of speech in their campaign.

Conclusions

This paper focuses on how the press presented the women political candidates to the public, and how they framed the campaign issues they defended. Reporting on women political candidates in the 2008 General Election in the mainstream media generally, appeared to be insipid—focusing on the trivial and superficial. It lacked in-depth and analytical discussion on women's contributions to political leadership. The amount and depth of coverage given to women political candidates and the issues they were promoting was modest when

compared to the total coverage on the election during the campaign period, and most of it was in the form of news stories and fillers. There was very little in-depth coverage to discuss the contribution and role of the women political candidates. Often, they were merely covered as urging female voters to exercise their democratic right to cast their votes to select their representatives, especially from their respective parties. Although the few better known or popular women incumbent candidates received more space in the print media than most of the women candidates campaigning, the coverage was still mostly superficial and not informative in nature. There were also missed opportunities for a more comprehensive coverage on viewpoints and the more serious work of women political candidates.

The depiction of women political candidates in the selected newspapers during the period of analysis appeared to be both negative and positive. There were cases when the women candidates were framed as being emotionally weak. On the other hand, when newspaper coverage constantly points out that a woman candidate is a wife and mother who has to juggle between her personal and professional lives, it could be construed to be a positive image as it shows women's ability to multi task. One could laud her time management skills and her struggles to balance multiple roles. The fact that they have done a good job as politicians, mothers and wives could be viewed as an achievement and empowerment for women. However, there seemed to be too much emphasis on the sex of the woman candidate and her ability to balance between the public and private spheres of her life, which was hardly the case when reporting on male candidates.

There is the viewpoint that some women candidates perhaps use "sexist methods" and frameworks to win in the election. The "sexist methods" would include feminine dressing, their speech, and supporting traditional roles and familial duties for women. But, this was not apparent in the news stories examined for this study. Instead there appeared to be subtle stereotyping in several of the newspaper reports examined with a few cases of blatant stereotyping of the women and their traditional roles.

There was a lack of emphasis in the coverage given to issues important in the public sphere that were defended by women candidates. The reports also did not appear to give sufficient credence to the leadership strength of the women candidates. Their involvement in the "soft" social issues often found in the private domain, like single mothers and vernacular schools, were emphasized. However, the issues associated with the women political candidates as covered in the newspapers may be the result of either issues the women candidates themselves promoted, or what the newspapers chose to cover and how they framed them.

In addition, sexist language used by the male candidates was reported in the media, either in the text or headline. The media's selection and gate-keeping process should be more vigilant about perpetuating the usage of such sexist terms. For example: "Shariff: Lustful ones want my 'virgin' Tasek Glugor". Datuk Sri Mohamad Sharif Omar described the Tasek Glugor constituency as "a beautiful young virgin" and he continued with "like any protective father" of such a maiden, he would defend her chastity and only allow suitable local candidates to have her (*The Star*, 19 February, 2008).

Journalists and media practitioners, by paying attention to high professional standards, ethics and creativity, can produce good stories on women political candidates and those aspiring to join politics, which could contribute to increased female political participation. In efforts to increase representation of women in political decision-making, it is also necessary to closely monitor and see how many women are nominated, how many actually win, and how far we are from the 30% critical mass needed for women's political representation as recommended in the CEDAW. Since the existing political representation of women at around 10% does not meet the recommended 30% mark, both the opposition and BN will need to address this in the next election.

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