

In the history of women struggling for change in Malaysia, three separate strands may be discerned: the anticolonial nationalist movements, the labor struggles, and the struggle for women's rights. Of these, by far the most significant and widespread mobilization of women had been in the anticolonial nationalist movements of both Right and Left in the period after World War II.

Nevertheless, women organizing within the right-wing nationalist movement did so within the confines of a subordinate status. The one person who had dared to challenge this—Khadijah Sidek, elected leader of the women's section of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 1954—was eventually expelled from the party. She had agitated for greater female representation in decision-making, an independent status for the women's section, a separate women's youth section, and the increased nomination of women to contest in the national elections.

The left-wing anticolonial struggle, as embodied in the All-Malayan Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) and the Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA), and its women's wing, the Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS), had raised the issue of women's representation, suffrage, and emancipation from traditional bonds. These organizations were however shortlived, as they were banned by the colonial government in 1948.

Communalism was the order of the day in subsequent Malayan, later Malaysian, politics. Noncommunal party politics which focus on social issues were not successful in wooing members. The Independence of Malaya Party, set up in 1951 and open to all races, specifically promised equal opportunities regardless of sex, but was defunct within a year. The Parti Negara, launched in 1954, guaranteed equal pay for equal work and equal opportunities for women, but it too was unsuccessful in attracting supporters. Yet another noncommunal party, the Pan-Malayan Labor Party, which had a commitment toward ensuring gender equality, including the establishment of a Women's Charter, also did not flourish.

Women's participation in politics, therefore, takes place within ethnic boundaries, and is subject to the strong political forces in the country. The appeal or nonappeal of women's issues, as the case may be, has been bound by these national forces, often communal in nature.

Struggling for Change

by Chee Heng Leng and Cecilia Ng

WORKERS' STRUGGLES

Besides the nationalist struggles, there is also a history of active and militant women participating in labor struggles. Prior to the country achieving independence, women workers had participated in strikes related to working conditions, pay and sexual harassment. In the postindependence period, women workers continued their activism. In the early 1960s, they commemorated International Women's Day, and women in the Labour Party (banned in the late 1960s) demonstrated against discrimination of women workers.

The early labor struggles were dominated by Chinese women, but with the large-scale entry of Malay women into the labor force in the mid-1970s and 1980s, women workers' struggles today are no longer ethnically based. Although women's participation in trade unions is minimal, ununionized women workers have undertaken mass action to stand up for their rights.

A notable example was the Mostek strike of 1985

which was waged under the leadership of Malays. This involved some 700 workers, majority women, retrenched by the Mostek Electronics Factory in the Bayan Lepas Free Trade Zone in Penang, and who had then picketed outside their factory gates to demand reinstatement or rightful compensation. In the 32 days of picketing, the workers organized themselves

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to make their demands at the Labour Office, stage a sit-in outside the Chief Minister's office, and present a memorandum to the Prime Minister at a public rally. They were supported by many other workers of all ethnic groups in the Free Trade Zone, reflecting the commitment and ability of women workers to struggle for their rights.

Indeed, there are many instances where women workers have independently undertaken militant action to struggle for their rights, but most of these actions have largely been unconsolidated. In another example, the workers of an electronics factory named RCA launched a struggle to register an in-house union in 1989. In its union-busting tactics, the management changed the name of the company twice, in addition to using indirect state collusion to deny the workers their legitimate right to organize. The case went through the courts, and the workers eventually won their case after a period of several years.

THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The struggle for women's rights in Malaysia can be traced back to the colonial era when access to schooling for girls paved the way for the social emancipation of women. Although limited, the expansion of schooling for girls in the preindependence period led to the entry of women into the teaching profession. The Malay Women Teachers' Union, founded in 1929, was

one of the earliest women's groups which advocated formal education for Malay women.

The organization of urban middle and upper class women on the platform of women's issues led to the formation of the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO) in 1963. An umbrella organization of women's groups with a welfare, religious, and service orientation, the NCWO represented educated middle and upper class women, with many of its members coming from the dominant political parties in the ruling coalition.

Since its inception, the NCWO has been successful in working for many social reforms, including equal pay for women in the public sector, better maintenance for divorced women, and better income tax and pension benefits for married women. It was also successful in gaining the appointment of women members as jurors and on National Councils, State Islamic Boards, and the National Council for Islamic Affairs. The Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976 was also fought by the women in the NCWO.

The NCWO is closely aligned with the state, as reflected in its current chairperson being the Minister of Social Development and National Unity. As such, it lobbies directly with the government and with members of the ruling political parties for its reforms.

A MORE RADICAL ORIENTATION

The 1980s witnessed the beginning of a more radical orientation in the articulation of women's issues. Women students aligning with international feminist trends in the 1960s and 1970s joined local women's organisations, or more often, created new autonomous women's groups.

The women who represented the new feminist ideology came together in the 1985 Joint Action Group on Violence Against Women (popularly referred to as JAG) to organize a historic two-day public event on issues of rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, prostitution, and the negative media portrayal of women. At that time, violence against women was an international issue, and in Asia, it picked up momentum particularly in India. In Malaysia, however, it was hardly considered an

issue: domestic violence was largely regarded as a "family affair," and rape was blamed upon the victim herself.

The 1985 JAG event put forth an alternative perspective by stressing that domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment are all forms of violence against women, and that they arise from the sexist structures in society which devalue women, and from the unequal power relationship between men and women. Prostitution was also shown to be a form of violence against women, supported by the social, economic, and cultural structures of society. It was further emphasized that one powerful way in which this unequal gender relationship is perpetuated is through the media—newspapers, magazines, cartoons, films, television, radio, and advertisements—where women are stereotypically portrayed as sex objects, dumb housewives, nagging mothers-in-law, etc.

The JAG workshops were oriented toward action, with discussions centered primarily on legal reforms. There was also a distinct emphasis on the collective process, as stated in the JAG VAW Proceedings (Joint Action Group, 1986:1): "One of the main objectives of the workshop was the actual process of working together as a group, as a collective, where the values of cooperation, sharing, and group decision-making were experienced."

TEN-YEAR CAMPAIGN

The two-day JAG event sparked similar events in other parts of the country and led to the birth of several autonomous women's organizations, including the All Women's Action Movement (AWAM) in Kuala Lumpur, Women's Crisis Centre (WCC) in Penang, the Sarawak Women for Women Society (SWWS) in Kuching, and the Sabah Women's Organisation (SAWO) in Kota Kinabalu.

In the subsequent 10 years, various women's organizations held exhibitions and

talks, conducted public education campaigns, and campaigned for law reform on rape and domestic violence. The antirape campaign took center stage in the earlier years, culminating in 1987 with the formation of Citizens Against Rape (CAR), a coalition comprising women's groups and other NGOs, as well as unaffiliated individuals. CAR's strategy was populist, taking to the streets, supermarkets, and other public places to raise public consciousness through enacting street dramas and organizing a demonstration against the brutal rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl.

The NCWO also joined in by holding a series of rape crisis seminars with the cooperation of the police. Even the women's wings of political parties were pressured to take a stand. In early 1987, the women's committee of the National



Front, the coalition of political parties making up the government, tabled a resolution to lobby the government to implement the law reforms that had been initiated by JAG.

Finally, after five years of struggle, the amendments to the laws on rape were passed in 1989. According to an independent observer, "The success of the campaign was because, while the NGOs' initiatives on the legal drafts were going through the proper state channels, the NGOs were also continuing the education and conscientization campaign throughout the country, generating the groundswell of popular support and mass media coverage which then fed back to the state."

The parallel struggle for legislation on domestic violence took a much longer time, and the Domestic Violence Act was only passed by Parliament in 1994 in the face of a great deal of resistance and displays of male chauvinism. Essentially, the domestic violence legal reform

process became institutionalized in that the committee which was formed to draft the legislation consisted of representatives of the police, Religious Affairs Department, and the judiciary as well as other experts and selected women's groups.

This had taken away the spirit of activism of the women's movement that was conceived in 1985, and which had seen through the antirape mobilization. Another factor was the tussle over whether the Act should cover Muslim women since family matters were under the jurisdiction of the Shariah Court. It was only in early 1993, when women's organizations got together again to launch a media campaign on the Act, that the authorities hastened the final stages of passing the legislation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to the widespread campaign in the last 10 years, violence against women issues have come to be accepted as legitimate social issues. Some would even say that these issues have been coopted by the establishment as they are not class-based and do not threaten the state or the capitalist classes.

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Nevertheless, the issue of domestic violence does confront the patriarchal social order to a certain extent, and may be the reason that it took 10 years for the Domestic Violence Act to be passed in Parliament. Since women's organizations worked together with the Department of Women's Affairs, the police, and the Religious Affairs Department on it, the final form also represents a compromised version of the original demands.

The extent to which women's organizations

can continue to challenge the patriarchal order in this way remains to be tested. The boundaries will be pushed further if, for example, women's groups take a stance against rape within marriage. Such a boundary was nearly breached when one women's organization published Lina's Dilemma, a comic strip advocating the use of condoms in the context of a discussion about sexuality among young single women. A furor was created by a Malay tabloid newspaper until the organization defended the importance of such messages in the current anti-AIDS campaign.

Access to information on contraception signals increased sexual freedom for women and is often perceived as a threat to the prevailing patriarchal order. Hence, issues encompassing women's sexuality, such as sex education and reproductive rights (as opposed to the more conventional family planning), will come up against resistance if any attempts are made to articulate and popularize them. These issues are particularly contentious because the Malaysian government stands together with other Islamic states (and the Vatican) in the international arena against abortion, reproductive rights and the breakdown of the nuclear family. A clear indication of this was at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing when the Malaysian delegation entered a reservation on the resolution on reproductive rights and sexuality.

BROADENING THE ISSUES

In a society that is severely segregated along ethnic and class lines, it is a challenge to broaden what has been defined to be the women's arena to include issues that will make the women's movement relevant to women of different classes and ethnic groups.

One current attempt is the building of an alternative women's coalition among the relatively more radical women's organizations as well as women's sections of the more progressive NGOs. The delineation of this coalition into four commissions—land, labor, culture and religion, and violence against women—reflects a concern that goes beyond what has traditionally been defined as women's issues.

This trend may also be seen in the 1995

celebration of International Women's Day organized by five Klang Valley-based women's organizations to mark the 10th anniversary of the campaign on violence against women. As part of the celebration, issues pertaining to land for urban settlers and indigenous women, rights of domestic workers, sexual harassment, sex workers, as well as women's concern for the environment were highlighted at a public forum. This attempt to broaden the scope of "women's issues" reflects at least one strand of the women's movement which is concerned that if it is too constrained and restricted in the issues it addresses, the movement will not be relevant to large and increasing numbers of women in the country.

CHALLENGES

The women's movement in Malaysia is facing many challenges. First, as the country's economic growth soars, its society is increasingly integrated into the global materialist culture. Incomes have risen, the standard of living is higher, and heightened consumerism, individualism, and materialism permeate all layers of Malaysian society. In this context, the women's movement is increasingly challenged in how it can offer a vision which can inspire younger women to join in its ranks.

Second, the women's movement is constrained by the communal tensions and religious barriers which deeply divide Malaysian society. The prospect of building a more broad-

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based and multiethnic movement depends on the extent to which these barriers can be overcome and how a Malaysian-type feminism that is relevant to all sectors can be forged.

Third, in order to build a progressive people's movement, both women's groups and mixed organizations need to be more open to

dialogue. The woman's question is unfortunately still seen as the prerogative of women's groups, by women and men alike, thus reinforcing the gender division of social issues.

Fourth, women's groups will have to concentrate their efforts and work with their allies in lobbying the government to implement the Beijing Platform for Action. In the current era of globalization, it is important for the women's movement to urge and pressurize the state to play a more proactive and regulatory role in order to advance, as well as to protect, the interests of women, particularly those marginalized by the development process.

Finally, the present middle-class and urban-based dominance of the more radical women's groups in the country needs to be surmounted, both in terms of participation as well as the issues raised. While a tentative attempt has been made to address this at the issue level, much more needs to be done. ♀

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