

# Malaysian Women at the Crossroads

by Cecilia Ng and Carol Yong

Malaysian women today are at a crossroad. They have to choose, indeed they must choose which paths they can take that will uphold their dignity, autonomy and respect in society. Since Malaysia became independent from Britain in 1957, the position of women has improved. The country has a rich resource base, and the economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s created a need for a large labor force. As a result, women had greater opportunities for education and employment.

Despite the material progress, however, Malaysian women remain subordinate in both the public and private spheres. Structurally, the legal system still discriminates on the basis of gender. The jobs available to most women tend to have poor and exploitative conditions. On a personal level, women generally are subsumed under patriarchic values that define their primary role in relation to the family, so they face the double burden of work at an outside job and at home.

Malaysian society is composed of Malays, Chinese, Indians, aborigines, indigenous groups, Eurasians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Europeans. This multi-ethnic composition has led to a dominance of narrow ethnic preoccupations that are championed by and ultimately benefit the economic and political interests of elites in each ethnic community.

Women often find themselves caught in a tug-of-war that is complicated by these various groups. On the one hand, they can provide a cheap source of labor. On the other hand, religious revivalists lecture that women belong at home.

The nineties is a crucial decade that will determine much about the nature and direction of these gender relations. Women's groups will have an important role to play in addressing the burning issues faced by women today.

What are these issues and how has the embryonic women's movement dealt with them? To what extent have women's groups overcome the barriers engendered by the lack of democratic space and the existing communalism\* in the country? What has been the role of government in championing the interests of women?

Nonetheless, if the women's movement is to effect any lasting change, it has to remember that patriarchy is not the only form of oppression in society. Patriarchy has been integral to feudal, capitalist and other forms of inequalities. As such, women's groups must move beyond "women's issues per se" and link up with other social groups seeking larger social and political transformation. While finding a way to



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## Women Struggling for Change

Women's struggles do not take place in a vacuum. They are determined, advanced or impeded by the social and political development in the rest of society. In Malaysia, women's struggles have been played on the center stage of nationalist struggles, class conflict and the constraints of communal realities. These struggles, which have mobilized women, rarely put gender issues on their agenda for change. It is only recently in the 1980s that newly emerging women's groups have begun to question and challenge patriarchy.

remain autonomous, the women's movement must also join other progressive forces, including men who are seeking to create new social relations at home, at work and in the social movement.

Today, women's organizations in Malaysia range from women's wings of political parties, both right and left, to government-sponsored women's groups, to non-governmental women's organizations (NGOs). NGOs also contain a range of groups: service-oriented bodies such as Women's Institute, middle-class alliances (National Council of Women's Organizations), and more activist groups such as the All Women Action Society

(AWAM) and the Sabah Women Action Resource Group (SAWA).

These groups participate in two types of women's mobilizations. First, women are needed to actively support a struggle based on nationalist, communal or progressive ideologies. These actions have primarily been reformist and restricted to demands for concessions from within the existing system. Indeed, if these demands such as greater employment opportunities or legal rights, correspond to the needs of the social order, they may even be encouraged or patronized by the state.

Second, women also struggle for their rights independently, usually in NGOs. This mobilization identifies problems of gender subordination as being rooted in the social, cultural, economic and political system, which is male-dominated, or patriarchal. Socialist feminists also oppose the capitalist nature of the system. Hence, mobilizing on this basis confronts not only patriarchy, but also other unequal structures in society.

By far the most significant and widespread mobilizing of women in Malaysian history has been in the anti-colonial and nationalist movements. These movements were mainly organized along ethnic lines; women of the three major ethnic groups existing then were organized separately. Within this ethnic context, the left and right wing traditions can also be distinguished. These distinctions, both ethnic and ideological, set a foundation that persists today.

In May 1946, in reaction to the colonial-sponsored Malayan Union proposals, 36 Malay organizations joined together to form the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). One of the organizations was the Persatuan Kaum Ibu Selangor (the Mother's Association of Selangor, or KI). Originally a welfare-oriented women's group, it became highly po-

liticized in the then highly-charged anti-Malayan Union atmosphere.

Other KI groups, with the encouragement of the men, quickly sprang up. At the height of the mass protests against the Malayan Union, UMNO depended heavily on its women supporters, who played prominent roles in public demonstrations and rallies. In 1949, these various KI associations were eventually reconstituted as a sin-

tion for young women. She also pushed for the increased nomination of women to contest in the national elections.

Sidek subsequently was expelled from the party. Although the official grounds for her expulsion were the breach of party discipline, it is clear that what remained in question was her challenge of male dominance in the party.

Women organizing in other move-



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gle body, auxiliary to UMNO.

Since then, the KI--renamed Wanita UMNO in 1971--has grown to become the largest women's party auxiliary in the country. By 1983, its membership was 526,716, or 55 percent of total party membership. Throughout its entire history, members of Wanita UMNO remained loyal supporters and chief gatherers of votes within UMNO rather than becoming leaders in their own right.

In the 1950s, this trend was challenged by Khadijah Sidek, who was elected leader of the KI in 1954. She agitated for greater female representation in the decision-making bodies of the party, an independent status for the women's section, and a separate sec-

ments have faced similar challenges. Within right-wing nationalist tradition, including the women's wings of the Chinese- and Indian-based parties, women are restricted by the confines of a subordinate status. As primarily wives and mothers, the female members are expected to follow and support, and not to lead nor share power with the male-dominated leadership.

The left-wing tradition in the anti-colonial struggle was embodied in the All-Malayan Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) formed in 1946 and the Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA), a coalition of left-wing groups. Both the AMCJA and PUTERA had a women's component, the Women's Federation and the Angkatan Wanita Sedar

(AWAS or Conscious Women's Front), formed in 1945. Although the women's wings raised the issue of women's representation, suffrage, and emancipation from traditional bonds and participated in marches, their struggle was shortlived. In 1948, the colonial government imposed Emergency Rule and banned all left-wing groups. AWAS and the Women's Federation ceased to exist after this.

It is clear that women's participation in politics takes place within ethnic boundaries and is subject to the strong political forces in the country, which are heavily flavored by communal considerations. The appeal or non-appeal of women's issues is also bound by these national forces.

### Workers' Struggles

Besides the nationalist struggles, women have also been active and militant in workers' struggles. While the extent of women's participation in labor struggles prior to Independence is not clear, we do know that women participated in strikes related to working conditions, pay and sexual molestation, especially on the rubber estates. One of the main issues in these strikes was sexual harassment.

Women workers continued their active participation in post-independent politics and the struggle for women's rights in the Labor Party. They commemorated International Women's Day in the early 1960s. Women in the Labor Party demonstrated against discrimination of women workers and actively campaigned for the release of political prisoners and the boycott of the 1969 General Election. These women were primarily Chinese, who formed the majority of the women workers then.

With the large-scale entry of

Malay women into the labor force in the mid-1970s and 1980s, women workers' struggles no longer have a solely ethnic base. Indeed, the past struggles continue, under the leadership of Malay women workers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, workers have fought against union-busting tactics of American companies and indirect state collusion to deny workers' legitimate demands. At times, management is pressured by multinational capital to provide a safe and stable haven for the exploitation of local labor. Whether these struggles can grow to meet the challenges of being both a workers' as well as a women's movement remains an open question.

### Women in other NGOs

In recent years, women have begun to organize around issues of violence against women, such as domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment. These issues have been spearheaded by newly-formed and more independent women's groups that are more action-oriented. Their members are mainly younger, middle-class women who also have links with the grassroots. Partly because of the nonpolitical nature of such issues, the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO) and even the women's wings of the ruling parties later participated in the campaign on violence against women in the 1980s.

This campaign focused on rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, legal reforms, and related issues. It ultimately led to a pronounced change in public consciousness and to such structural reforms as improved services for rape survivors and amendments to the rape laws. Its success underlined in part the fact that rape did not constitute a political threat to the

state. Gender issues that do not fundamentally undermine class power relations can have a humanitarian appeal and thus receive wide support from the press and public.

The experience of this campaign taught the women's movement a number of lessons: First, women's NGOs have an important and catalytic role to play in continuously pressing for reforms. Second, general public awareness has to be raised through educational sessions on both a large-scale and also community level. Third, women from across all ethnic groups and social classes can unite on such issues, providing an alternative to the narrow communalism of the day. Fourth, the media plays an important role in acting as a channel to mobilize demands.

This reliance on the media, however, also constitutes a weakness. If there is a clampdown on the press, for example, women's groups may have no other viable alternative to mobilize public support. Lobbying from within would take a long time, particularly since women's issues do not take center stage in Malaysian politics.

Furthermore, women's NGOs in Malaysia have relatively few active and committed members and are constrained by their urban base and middle-class composition. The issues women's groups raise and the perspective they have adopted are still within the narrow confines of "gender." Patriarchy has not been analyzed in relation to the wider social forces in society.

The test for the women's movement would be how to organize a multi-class movement, based on the struggles of working women in alliance with other democratic movements. It also has to learn to adopt a less exclusive attitude and build up more dialogues with men. In expanding the still neophyte movement, it has to be careful to maintain principles,

values and processes of democracy, decentralization and dialogue.

Many challenges lie ahead. The women's movement is in part constrained by communal tensions and religious barriers. Additionally, the lack of democratic space has led to the absence of a larger progressive movement to which it can attach itself. Unless the women's movement can transcend communal politics, religious conservatism, and its own class privileges and enlarge the democratic space, visions of democracy and freedom will remain a dream for both women and men alike. Nonetheless, because of the nature of the struggle, the women's movement can offer a positive alternative for meaningful social change in the country.

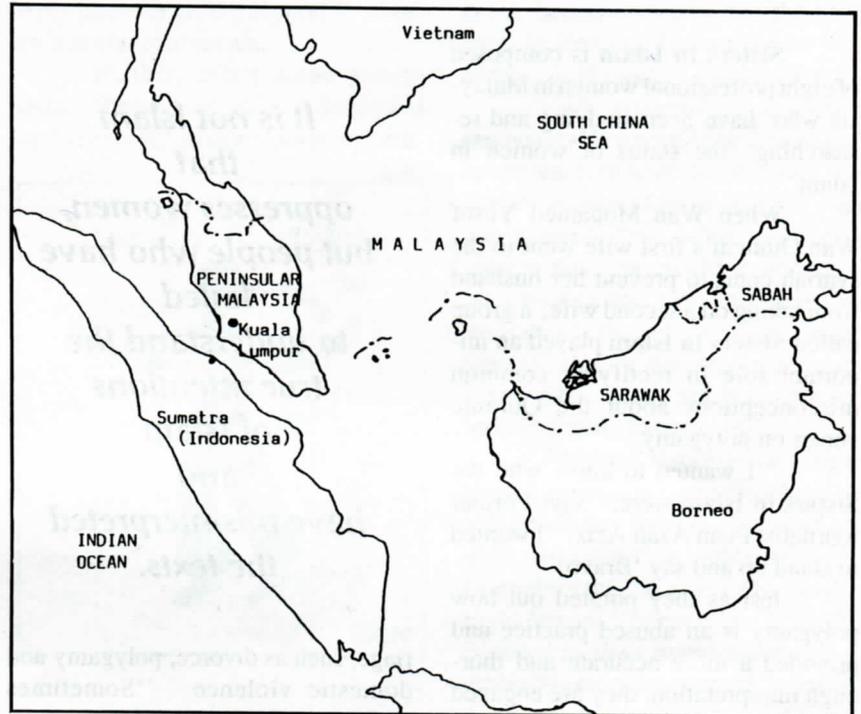
### Contradictory challenges

Malaysian women today are undergoing complex changes and facing many challenges, some of them contradictory in nature. No single image can capture today's Malaysian woman: she can be Muslim executive, native peasant, Chinese worker, Malay squatter or Indian professional. She is oppressed and exploited but she can also exploit others. She is a favorite of the development process, which itself is fraught with contradictions, compounded all the more by Islamic revivalism nationally and internationally.

Malaysian women must play several roles, either simultaneously or at different periods of their lives. They are asked to contribute to the economy

and are provided relatively wide educational opportunities. Thus they have become more assertive and independent as they take on more responsibilities in their jobs. On the other hand,

having evolved through so many stages of being mobilized and helping others, the struggle and potential of their own liberation has just begun.



they are asked to stay at home if there is a recession, or to bear more children to achieve the 70 million Population Policy, since they are considered primarily as wives and mothers.

However, in recent years women are asking themselves what they really want for themselves, for their families and for society. The formation of newer women's groups has helped facilitate this process of search and action. After

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\* Communalism - social organization on a communal basis; loyalty to a social/ political grouping based on religious affiliation.