Media, Access to Information and ICT and the Empowerment of Women & Girls

This Executive Summary represents an abstract of the research and analysis that was carried by Media4Democracy between October and November in Malaysia. The assessment was carried out within the democratic opening of Malaysia where the newly elected government has shown greater openness and more responsiveness to civil society and media. The research was aimed at assessing the link between media and gender equality in the context of Malaysia and determining how to engage with media to improve gender equality in Malaysian society. The report provides an overview of the state of the media and gender equality in the country and works to identify opportunities to improve gender equality through and with the media.

Executive Summary

Despite an apparent modernity, Malaysia remains a traditional society with a deeply rooted patriarchal culture. The media is also affected by this paradox: about half of the journalists are women, but it is rare for them to reach leadership positions. Even if they do, this does not influence the content and more notably, the way women are portrayed. In terms of access to information, there is a difference in available content depending on the language, with media in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia or Malay) being less diverse. Access to ICT, despite representing a welcome opportunity to bridge the gender gap, is for the time being, exacerbating it, as women are far less able to utilise ICT and less represented as professionals in this area. Cyber-bullying is widespread in Malaysia and data show that it affects more women than men, limiting their freedom of expression and silencing their voices.

Gender inequality

Whilst some successes to enhance women's representation and participation were achieved by the previous government, there were only brief engagements with the previous Malaysian government to advocate for inclusive development and drive a new policy agenda on women's empowerment. Overall, the government did not have a culture or established ways of consulting the public.

In its Manifesto, the Pakatan Harapan government provided a strong commitment to empowering the rights of women in Malaysia and to recognizing the importance of their roles. However, after decades of little engagement between Government and CSOs, Malaysian stakeholders are not accustomed to interacting in terms of lobby & advocacy, consultation, and establishing dialogue and dissent. Both sides need to become aware of their 'new' roles and to be strengthened to act in an effective way to realise the commitments laid out in the Manifesto and beyond.

The major obstacle to gender equality in Malaysia is the high degree of acceptance of inequalities by both women and men. These inequalities are barely questioned and only rights-based activists tend to challenge them. In this context, the media with its catalytic effect can have a considerable impact on gender equality by challenging and shaping norms and displaying positive role models for women. If the recent political changes did not lead to any transformation of the gender relations yet, it nevertheless represents an opportunity to do so. In order for the media to be a catalyst for the empowerment of women, the media themselves first need to be empowered.

Media landscape to represent society

Providing independent information to the public is one of the functions of professional journalism. In a democratic society, it is a vital feature of democratic decision-making, since it creates transparency and allows citizens to make informed decisions. Directly or indirectly, the Malaysian media are largely in the hands of political parties and/or businesses. This ownership has led to a lack of critical and balanced reporting by the media professionals who resort to (self-)censorship, and to providing Malaysians with mostly one-sided information lacking critical or opinionated content worth sparking a dialogue among citizens and with the government.

Citizens were aware of the lack of media independence but had few alternatives to obtain objective and unbiased news, which led them to source for information online, be it alternative news sites, blogs and even social media.

Often, CSOs are considered to be the voice of the people, amplifying public concerns at local, national and international levels. Media can and should also play this role to ensure that all voices are heard, while holding the government and businesses more accountable to citizens. Media can contribute to greater social cohesion, stronger and more open democracies, and to creating more opportunities for all, thus reducing inequalities. The media can achieve this without taking sides, either of the government or of the CSO; media just need to focus on meeting the information needs of all citizens, representing diverse voices and promoting inclusive media.

The assessment found that the above conclusions are valid for both Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah.

Women in the newsroom

Although women and girls make up half of Malaysia's population, gender imbalance still prevails in the media sector. In general, women are present and visible in the work place in Malaysian media organisations, however, their numbers are significantly smaller in the top positions. The pool of women eligible for top management is sparsely populated as many working women leave the workforce when they have families. Women's representation shrinks further when it comes to representation on boards (no more than 12%). In Malaysia, women's participation and responsibility in the decision-making process is characterised by a significant gender disparity. Media organisations are no exception to this phenomenon.

In Malaysia, the existence of gender-based discrimination and unequal opportunity within media industries, for example in pay, hiring, allocation of work, and promotions for women, prevails and is widely accepted, even by women. Societal norms and practices function as a disadvantage for women in relation to men. Women are faced with childcare responsibilities, and men communicate in a competitive instead of a cooperative way. Stereotyping exists in the newsroom, and (sexual) harassment and bullying are 'normalised'.

For media to give voice to women, it is vital to increase the participation and presence of women in media organisations, at all levels from newsroom to top-positions, and have a more gender-sensitive workplace with no stereotyping and (sexual) harassment. This requires an active approach by the media outlets, since fighting societal norms (religious, patriarchal) and social stigma requires careful attention and a long-term approach. A policy alone cannot fully prevent discrimination or harassment; permanent sensitisation and an appropriate systematic response to misconduct can.

Media content monitoring

The content monitoring data shows that there is an imbalance in the representation of women in the news. Women's voices, perspectives and issues are still invisible, and women only make up 25% of news sources. The results also suggest that having more female journalists in the media may not be enough to tip that imbalance. Using the GEM classification shows that many of the stories are gender blind, with only very few news stories that challenge stereotypes. This means there is a lot of potential for adding a gender-angle to stories and showing how both men and women are impacted by the news reported.

The underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of women in news content is closely related to how and by whom news is made. An underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in media outlets is associated with the production and distribution of media content that reflects and expresses the gender inequality present in the media workforce and wider society.[1]

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[1] There is a positive correlation between the increase of women in editorial or other leadership positions and the production of content that represents and serves women, challenging gender stereotyping.

Here, the all too familiar multiplier effect of media is at its worst. Media see themselves as a mirror of society, and not as an actor of change. This is a missed opportunity, since media could play a role in challenging existing gender norms in society. News media shape what people think is important and how they view the world.

In general, citizens do not recognize subtle gender stereotypes conveyed in news content and they need to become more aware of this. Media literacy courses can help citizens to recognise and consequently challenge these gender stereotypes. By providing more diverse story angles, including the views and perspectives of women and challenging gender stereotypes in news content, media have the ability to contribute to gender equality in society.

This research shows that there is a need for constant and consistent monitoring of the media so that empirical evidence and examples can be used to make the media accountable for reporting that is more gender balanced.

Access to information

Although the gender gap was not highlighted as the main issue for access to information, it becomes more pronounced when layered with the rural/urban divide and the ease at which the content could be accessed in the different languages. Regarding the latter, there are differences in the type of content available in the English, Malay and Chinese speaking media.

Malay language media are less diverse, primarily due to the prolonged state control and dominance of political, social and cultural information; the translation of even basic terms such as 'gender' is not easy, it is biased, and subsequently limits the discussion on the topic. Therefore, the spectrum of opinions is different. The issue is therefore more about the access to certain types of information according to the region and the languages used by the media.

The difference between English media and Malay media transforms the issue of language into an issue of access to information; the content differs greatly from one language to another. "*Some English liberal media are open to report on women issues but it is not the case for vernacular media, which tend to have patriarchal values. They are less into gender issues and tend to focus on lifestyle, and cultural issues with a conservative stance. There is a lack of space in vernacular media,*" according to Pook Li Yoon from Empower.

According to our informants, many of the young generation in Sabah, especially from the rural areas, prefer to access social media and reading materials in Malay. As such, efforts to raise awareness about gender equality, human rights, child rights and the like that are in Malay, would have reached a far wider audience than had they been in English. Unfortunately, such content on gender equality is not widely available in the Malay language. Civil society groups are making an effort to put out more content in Malay, but their combined output is still very little compared to the plethora of conversations, 'awareness raising' and reading materials that seek to maintain the

status quo of the patriarchal society. Therefore, there is a need for content, for translation of books and of gender-related content into Malay.

The wide, if not unanimous, use of social media by young people makes the need for a media literacy campaign urgent, precisely because of the huge potential for access to information. "*Social media are becoming as important as geography, history, maths these days. It is ridiculous that children are not equipped with media literacy,*" says Steven Gan from Malaysiakini. This is confirmed by Dr Subatra Jayaraj: *"There is not enough critical thinking from education services. The youth have a lot of information but lack the skills to go through or process the information."* A media literacy programme can contribute to understanding the news, critically review what is said, raise awareness on the kind of portrayal of men and women in media, and to recognize stereotypes and to include girls in news. When young people are empowered with knowledge, they can critically reflect on the gendered stereotypes perpetuated through media and demand better representation.

Access to ICT

Through innovation, investment and development of products and services, the Malaysian public and private sector can play an important role in advancing gender equality and improving the lives of women. However, the patriarchal society and subsequent lack of encouragement of women to pursue a career in ICT has led to underrepresentation in the ICT education and private sector. And despite the high access to technology in Malaysia, women have less access to internet than men. Malaysian women are prevented from enjoying the benefits of meaningful access to ICT for women's empowerment in the economic and educational/professional sphere, by factors such as relevant content/products, affordability, and skills. ICT is not providing the opportunities, capacity or understanding sufficiently to leverage women's empowerment in Malaysia.

While, from a young age, girls may consider ICT courses, there is little in terms of providing them with opportunities for a career in the industry. Since the sector is male-dominated, young and experienced women have to compete with men on the men's terms, reducing the possibility of introducing a more gender-balanced sector in terms of leadership, work culture and even products and more gender-nuanced output.

Cyber-harassment

The aim and effect of cyber-bullying and online harassment is to silence the voices of women and girls who challenge the dominant narratives, either on social media or by excluding them from mainstream reporting. While new media platforms can have the function of breaking down traditional divisions, the more interactive platforms also facilitate the reproduction of long-established patterns of gender harassment and discrimination in a digital setting.

Digital technologies have enabled women journalists to work remotely, when they face the risk of online harassment through the communication channels. Due to the absence of comprehensive policies on sexual harassment, women in the media continue to face these risks offline and online.

Opportunities to improve gender equality

The report, in addition to providing an overview of the state of the media and gender equality in the country, identified opportunities for the EU Delegation to improve gender equality through and with the media in five particular areas:

- **Strengthening women's decision making and leadership in media organisations:** More women in leadership would strengthen women's voice in terms of content. The current gender imbalance in the media organisations at board/management and leadership positions feeds gender stereotyping in content production.

- **Addressing gender-based stereotypes in media content:** Widespread stereotyping is a serious obstacle to gender equality and feeds gender discrimination. In addition to being a root cause of violence against women and girls, this also restricts women in the fulfilment of their full potential. The content of Malaysian media reflects and perpetuates existing gender stereotypes in society instead of including more diverse views, perspectives and voices of women that challenge existing stereotypes. Media see themselves as a mirror of society, and not as an actor of change with the ability to contribute to enhancing gender equality in society.

- **Ensuring and strengthening women's and girls' access to information as means of empowerment:** Informed women can make more effective decisions and enable them to exercise their rights, to participate more in public life and to challenge power relations. In Malaysia, the inequal access to information is more related to language than to gender. In addition, the use of social media by young people evidently shows the need for a media literacy campaign to contribute to understanding the news, critically review what is said, raise awareness on the kind of portrayal of men and women in media, and to recognize stereotypes and to include girls in news.

- **Strengthening and leveraging women's and girls' access to, training in as well as professional engagement with ICT:** The gender gap in the area is significant in Malaysia in terms of access to ICT and representation within the ICT sector. Despite high access to technology in Malaysia, women have less access to internet than men. Instead of ICT being used an opportunity to diminish inequalities, it exacerbates the existing and creates new ones.

- **Addressing cyber-bullying for women and girls:** Cyber-bullying is widespread in Malaysia. This consequently restricts women from expressing themselves and being heard. It reinforces the taboo on topics related to women, leading to a real limitation of women's voices.

Below is a list of selected recommendations for the EU Delegation and all interested stakeholders, for the five areas of work, categorised by topic, type of action (programming support, advocacy, and political dialogue) and stakeholders that have been identified as potential actors. The suggested timeline is also indicated.

1) Strengthening women's decision making and leadership in media organisations

Programming action: Support training on leadership for female journalists and media professionals.
   Target: Media organisations
   Stakeholders: women's organisations, media support organisations
   Timeline: short and mid-term

Dialogue & Advocacy action: Policy dialogue for the inclusion of private sector in the National Women Policy. Media would then be obliged to provide sex-disaggregated data on their organisation.
   Stakeholder: Ministry of Women
   Timeline: mid-term

2) Addressing gender-based stereotypes in media content

Programming action: Support gender sensitive reporting courses both in media organisations and in universities.
Dialogue & Advocacy action: Advocacy for gender sensitive reporting courses both in media organisations and in universities.
   Targets: Ministry of Education, media representatives, and Media Council if set-up.
   Partners: women's organisations, media support organisations, academics
   Timeline: short and mid-term

Dialogue & Advocacy action: Advocacy to strengthen the mandate of the Communication and Multimedia Content Forum.
   Targets: CMCF
   Partners: Women's organisations, human rights organisations, academics
   Timeline: mid and long-term

3) Ensuring and strengthening women's and girls' access to information as means of empowerment

Programming action: Support gender-sensitive media literacy courses.
Dialogue & Advocacy action: Advocate for gender-sensitive media literacy courses.
   Target: Ministry of Education, Committee for Education policies
   Partners: media support organisations, women's organisations, Malaysiakini
   Timeline: short term

Dialogue & Advocacy action: Advocacy for improved access to gender-related information in Malay.
   Target: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural Affairs
   Partners: grassroots organisations, women's organisations
   Timeline: mid and long-term

4) Strengthening and leveraging women's and girls' access to training in and professional engagement with ICT

Programming action: Support awards or events about girls in ICT.
   Target: government if done under its patronage
   Stakeholders: private sector (including hackathons, women in coding projects), universities and colleges, women's organisations
   Timeline: mid and long-term

Dialogue & Advocacy action: Dialogue with private sector to develop programmes. Through partnerships to empower women in ICT (skills, training, digital devices).
   Target: private sector, notably Microsoft
   Partners: private sector, women's organisations
   Timeline: short and mid-term

5) Addressing cyber-bullying for women and girls

Programming action: Support training for girls on leadership and rights.
   Target: Ministry of Education, Committee on Education policies
   Partners: women's organisations
   Timeline: short and mid-term

Dialogue & Advocacy action: Advocacy to incorporate cyber-bullying into the anti-bully programmes run at schools, through collaborations with civil society groups.
   Target: Ministry of Education, Committee on Education policies, women's organisations
   Partners: women's organisations
   Timeline: short and mid-term