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Images of Women and Human Rights: A Content Analysis of Malaysian Media During the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

Introduction

Images of nations, leaders and groups of people transmitted to readers by the media can be presented in multifarious ways. In this regard, newspapers have an advantage over other media since printed words can leave strong impressions and lasting memories in the minds of readers. Hence, newspapers are considered important transmitters or carriers of images that form the basis upon which readers perceive certain nations, leaders, groups of people or individuals. Because images are received at least partially through the mass media, they have the ability to affect the formation of world views on nations, leaders and groups of people and in this case, the women's groups.

This paper attempts to identify the types and direction of images of women and women's groups which attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in September 1995. The focus of this paper is on the coverage of the media event by the print media in Malaysia. This paper focuses on the type and direction of images of women and women's groups attending the Fourth World Conference on Women.

During the conference, the media were said to be the major image carriers of the women gathered in Beijing. The media, especially the Western media, were accused of painting negative images of women delegates and manipulating the truth. Reports that found their way in the newsholes

talked about negativities such as chaotic forum schedules, continuous protests and demonstrations by several nations' delegates, shabby apartments and poor infrastructure for the handicaps which in actuality made up a small part of the conference.

The Fourth World Conference on Women was organised by the United Nations in Huairou, Beijing in September 1995. However, parallel to the Beijing conference, a Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) Forum on Women was also held. As a result, an influx of over 35,000 women from all over the world headed for Beijing all at the same time. The conference marked the first time the Chinese government had to face the issue of freedom of speech and expression by visiting delegates. The conference hoped to give women a platform from which they could air their grievances and discuss matters regarding family development and issues affecting women. Media were the primary sources of information about the conference. What went on and what were printed in the media were something of great significance for such a study to be carried out. We quote several excerpts from the Malaysian print media regarding the conference.

- Women's image in the media has not improved despite the fact that more women now work in television, radio and newspapers (*New Straits Times*, 4 September 1995)

- Women's forum officials demanded yesterday that Chinese organisers halt harrassment and surveillance at their meeting and US delegation leaders said Beijing had no right to intimidate delegates (*New Straits Times*, 3 September 1995).

- United Nations research highlights a wide gap between men and women in their treatment under law, in the workplace and in the political arena in many countries of the world (*New Straits Times*, 4 September 1995)

- Women must have at least 30 per cent representation in key political and executive positions if they are to have full and equal participation in decision making said Malaysian Prime Minister's wife, Datin Seri Dr. Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali (*The Star* 7 September 1995)

- US First Lady Hillary Clinton launched a scathing attack today on China's efforts to gag free speech at a global grassroots women's forum here and on its alleged human rights abuses (*New Straits Times*, 6 September 1995)

- Actress Jane Fonda said on Tuesday that governments should use the media to change attitudes about women and teach family planning (*New Straits Time*, 7 September 1995)

- A group of delegates at the global women's forum hit out yesterday at what they described as biased western coverage of the 10-day event, saying the media had dwelt on controversy and sensationalism (*The Star*, 9 September 1995)

The importance of media as image carriers have been often and widely discussed by scholars, practitioners, politicians and citizens of many countries, and the role of the media has become even more pronounced. The media always plays a more crucial role when historic events take place such as the Fourth World Conference on Women as shown by the excerpts. The media, as image carriers, have the potential to portray individuals or group of individuals or nations in a negative or positive light, or in whatever directions they feel fit to describe. One cannot deny that opinions are formed in part by gathering pieces of information that have been reported through the mass media and comparing them with the images of events or people, which already have been stored in our minds.

Negative portrayal of individuals or nations or group of people in the media, might conjure negative perceptions in the minds of the audience.

When the print media chose to allocate space to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, devil terms (to borrow from Weaver, 1970) such as "hardcore feminists", "female parliamentarian", "burning bras" and other negative reports such as "nude women running around the streets of Huairou" were freely printed in the media. These news would give any reader the impression that the Conference was chaotic; that the women who attended the Conference were radical beings with nothing better to do but to "burn bras," and

generally eclipsed many positive accomplishments at the Conference.

Image Making and Stereotyping

"Image" originates from the Latin word "Imago" which is related to the Latin word *imitari* , meaning "to imitate." A standard American dictionary defines image as "a popular conception as of person, institution or nation projected especially through the mass media" (*Webster*, 1983:600).

Walter Lippmann (1954) equates the meaning of image with "stereotypes" which are oversimplified, generalised and abstracted patterns that help human beings find meanings in the world. Lippmann (1954:118) wrote: "We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them."

According to Merrill (1962) an image is a system of characterising groups of persons or things according to marks or labels. He says the stereotypes that groups of people have of one another are unrealistic, especially when racial and cultural boundaries are crossed. Such unrealistic or oversimplications of images as portrayed by the media can pose serious obstacles to international communication and understanding.

Scholars researching on image-making or stereotyping in the media find that image making not only simplifies one's perceptions of certain events, individuals or nations, it also gives a partial and superficial image of reality.

According to Boorstin (1972) whether image is a fact or fantasy, its main function is to overshadow reality. Boorstin cited six characteristics of an image namely, synthetic and impressionistic, believability, vividness, passiveness, simplicity and ambiguity. Boorstin considered acts of stereotyping which in essence simplify images of races, nations, individuals and groups, as the phenomena that narrows and limits our understanding of the underlying truth. This is because we only understand events within our frame of reference, which is further shaped by the images already formed in our minds. A lot of these images were formed through our continuous exposure to media content.

In our ancestral days, people were better able to distinguish between the simple truth and contrived images and

between reality and sham. Truth is what one can see with one's own naked eyes. But now, great strides in technologi-cal advancement, with the mass media taking central role, have blurred the edges of reality and revolutionised people's way of thinking.

With the very same advances, the multifarious images of women at the Beijing conference portrayed by the mass media, however planned, contrived or distorted, may seem more vivid, more attractive, more impressive and more persuasive than reality itself. But without media exposure of the event (or pseudo-event), readers who do not have the opportunity to participate at such media related events, may not be informed of such developments. Hence, media portrayal of women, be it negative or positive, can be traced by analysing media content.

Women and Mass Media

In many developing nations, the priority need is to make women conscious of their on-going and potential participation in the development processes. This is typically so in economi-cally developing societies such as Malaysia. Women remain entangled within the webs of traditional values, sex-roles and sex-discrimination which are then reinforced in the workplace. Often such discrimination resulted in women filling the lower ranks of the job hierarchy whilst only a few landed in the decision-making positions.

Women are oftentimes invisible and silenced in econom-ics, politics, religion, science and technology but not so in the media and advertising where women are made to be highly visible yet "powerless" (See Garcellano, 1991).

Rahmah Hashim (1986) found from her study on women in broadcasting in Malaysia that in the 1980s more women (51 percent) chose radio broadcasting as their career compared with 32 percent in 1967. However, only about 20 percent had tertiary education. It is therefore not surprising to find the majority of women in the electronic media usually satisfied enough to remain as secretaries, clerks, script assistants, make-up artists, or translators. Very few are bold enough to work as television producers or remain long enough to climb up the management ladder.

Based on the 1970-1990 data from the Sixth Malaysia Plan, participation of women in the workplace has risen from

37.2 percent in 1970 to 46.7 percent in 1990, but still lagging behind the men.

We often tend to hear complaints from women professionals that the women somehow have to work harder than their male colleagues so as to prove that women workers are as good, if not better, than their male counterparts. In terms of job promotions, working women, for instance in the media organisations, experience more horizontal job movement than vertical mobility. A research done on women journalists and decision making in Malaysia showed that only 6.4 percent of the women journalists hold decision making positions in their newspapers (Faridah, 1990).

Another study on women in the media (cited in Rahmah Hashim and Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri, 1994) shows that majority of women journalists are between 20-39 years of age. Majority are single/not married. Those who are married have very small families, with 1 - 2 children of school-going age. More than half have tertiary education. Almost 65 percent have only recently joined the profession, indicating a high turnover rate among women journalists. Only 26 percent wants to remain in the profession while another 15 percent say they will leave for a greener pasture.

A study on Women Managers in Southeast Asia (cited in Rahmah Hashim and Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri, 1994) describes women managers as young, aged between 30-40 years old, tertiary educated, have very good academic qualifications, from middle-income group, and have parents who are also highly educated. Majority marry late and there is a tendency for the husbands to be similarly qualified. About 25 percent remain single. It took the women managers 10-20 years before they could reach management level.

A recent report by Mediawatch, an organisation which has conducted a global monitoring project over the last 10 years, has found that many women are still having difficulty gaining access into the media. Findings by the organisation show that although 43 percent of media practitioners are women, only 17 percent of stories are about women (*New Straits Times*, 4 September 1995).

Another interesting revelation came from a 50-year study presented by the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. According to the study which was conducted from 1945 to

1995, women's involvement in politics worldwide was only 11.6 percent. Fifty years ago when the study was first carried out, there were only three percent women in politics (*New Straits Times*, 9 September 1995).

These findings demonstrated that women's issues and women's struggles for whatever rights they have, are pushed aside or discarded as trivialities. Although findings show that there are women who have made achievements and are successful in their professions, it is still the men who hold the rein; men who wield and bestow power. The women still have far to go when it comes to participation in decision making.

Even when they have a career, women are expected by society to be primarily responsible for the reproduction and care of the next generation. Such situations place women in dilemmas and at conflicting tensions. Women do not have much choice. They either stay home and take care of their children and remain productive at the household level or they can go out and work and contribute to their family income and at the same time shoulder the burden of household chores, child caring and work pressures (Faridah, 1989).

In general, women are at a disadvantage. However, this is not because of their inherent weaknesses or disabilities but due to the lack of concern in development programs to develop their potentials. If attempts are not made to cater to their needs and potentials, women will always lag behind (Rushidan Islam Rahman, 1985).

In recent years we observe the sudden influx of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and various women's organisations stating their stand in national development programs and struggling for what is generally termed as women's rights. World seminars and conferences were held to discuss the plight of women. Although these concerted efforts are showing some positive signs, the struggle seems endless.

Today the exploitation of women have gone beyond the traditional setting, into the more sophisticated modern world where women's so-called natural weaknesses and femininity are being exploited both by men and women for economic gains. Women who are vocal and fight for their cause are being dubbed or labelled as hardcore feminists. While those who become commercial symbols especially in media advertisements are portrayed as superficial and mindless. These are the dark side of the mass media.

The mass media not only help to carry the image of women across the masses but also reinforce cultural stereotypes formed in the minds of the masses - that women are basically the inferior ones of the sexes. With constant reminder, inferiority becomes habitual and familiar and even desirable (Faridah, 1989).

Media portrayal of women in the past decade had not been fair to women. Women are portrayed as emotional, undecisive and mindless beings. These stereotypical generalisations have been carried out for ages, even until today. Women's images in the media have not improved despite having more women working as media practitioners.

Women, Human Rights and the Media

The definition of human rights is very subjective and we are faced with the problem of who should define it. Human rights can be viewed from various perspectives namely civil and political rights as well as economic and socio-cultural rights. But whatever perspectives are adopted by certain countries will eventually depend upon several factors including a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the political, economic and social processes within the countries.

In western countries, for instance, individual rights prevail over community rights while Asian countries, such as Malaysia, place a greater emphasis on the interest of community over the rights of the individual. While the western human rights' concept place greater emphasis on each individual's political and civil rights, the Asian concept of human rights stresses the importance of economic development over other rights (Musa Hitam, 1995).

However, the interpretation of human rights may differ slightly due to diversed culture, religion, economic and political system in the world's nations. For instance, in the recent women's conference in Beijing, women's delegates could not reach total agreement with regard to several issues that are bound by religion for instance sexual rights and abortion. Political rights also become sensitive issues because women in several nations are excluded by law from their legislatures.

In Southeast Asia, particularly Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia, women have achieved a higher status than in others, thanks to education, a relatively open environment and buoyant economies (See Victoria C. Licuanan, 1996).

Women in Malaysia, particularly, have since 1969 enjoy equal pay for equal work. Women also enjoy similar pension rights under the Pension Act 1970, Employees Provident Fund Ordinance, and the Workmen's Compensation Act. Malaysia is signatory to the Geneva Convention on Human Rights (and women's rights are human rights!). Malaysia is a party to the various declaration on the advancement of women's status and has also acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) albeit with certain reservations (Ministry of National Unity and Social Development Malaysia, National Report on Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995: 35-41). CEDAW, is considered a path breaking charter of the legal and human rights of women, was approved by the UN in 1979.

At the Opening Address of the Asean Minister's Conference in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1975, Malaysia's second Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, stated:

> Women are among the country's important assets, which influence decisively the quality of life and strength of the economic and social foundations of our sovereignty. This vast potential if properly channelled will help to materialise the goods we seek to accomplish in national development.

In 1976, the National Advisory Council on the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) was established as a department in the Prime Minister's Department. NACIWID is a multisectoral body comprising representatives from the government and the non-governmental sectors. It provides the platform for greater intensification of efforts toward the integration of women in development.

The adoption of the National Policy on Women in December 1989 reflects the advancement of women in Malaysia. A visible impact of the Policy was the inclusion of a chapter on Women in Development in the Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991-1995 citing past achievements of women, outlined issues and concerns still outstanding, and identified those concerns which restricted the full integration of women in development. A number of strategies relating to the development of women in the media are also included in the National Policy for Women (*The National Policy on Women*, 1995: 20-21).

According to a renowned Malaysian journalist, A. Samad Ismail (1991), against such a backdrop, it is natural that the Malaysian media have chosen a consensual, community-oriented concept of relationship with the government as the only practical way in their effort to contribute to nation building.

In the past few years, the coverage of human rights by the Malaysian mass media, have taken on a higher elevation. According to a Malaysian lawyer cum social activist, the print media in particular have addressed some public interest issues. The broadcast media have also started some live talk shows with people from all walks of life participating and addressing human rights issues. They include politicians, professional experts, scholars and social activists.

Human rights coverage in the Malaysian media are seen from multifarious angles and dimensions. News stories regarding violence against women, child abuse, trafficking of women and children for sex; abandoned babies; the continuous slaughter, torture, and systematic rape of women and children in wars; poverty, political and economic inequality, and sex discrimination, are some of the women's issues which are constantly being addressed by the mass media.

With such a wide coverage on human rights, the media have successfully made human rights issues as something comprehensible.

To what extent have the media played their role in highlighting women's plight for their rights? To what extent are the media involved in giving the kind of images on women and their struggles? Who created the images? These are the few questions that this paper have dwelt upon.

This paper is based on a content analytical study of the coverage of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing by three Malaysian English dailies. The period of study covered was from September 3 - 23, 1996 which marked the beginning till the end of the conference and the aftermath of the conference. This period was chosen simply because of the significant events that were taking place.

Findings: Human Rights Issues and Media Focus

There were 107 news stories and features during the period of study. About 32.5 percent of the news came from the leading national daily, *New Straits Times* (*NST*), 47.7 percent from the

leading national tabloid, *The Star* and 19.6 percent from a competitive national tabloid, **The Sun.** About 72 percent of the news were straight news reports while only 17.8 percent were from features and 10.3 percent were from editorials, letters to editors and picture stories.

In terms of story length, all the three newspapers gave special emphases on the women's issues. The tabloid newspapers , *The Star* and *The Sun*, gave more full-length pages, with long and medium length news while the broadsheet newspaper, *NST*, also used more long and medium length news which normally cover almost half of the broadsheet. Majority of the coverage on the women's conference was of medium length (51.4 percent), 33.6 percent in the "long" category while 15 percent in the "short" category.

In terms of source of news, 49.5 percent were generated by the newspapers' own staff and special correspondents. However, the utilisation of news from the international wire services were also high especially from Reuters (18.7 percent) and 15 percent from Agence France Presse (AFP). The findings showed that the newspapers used less of BERNAMA's (Malaysian national news agency) news output on the conference. This is probably due to the fact that almost all newspapers in Malaysia have stationed their special women writers and correspondents in Beijing to cover the conference. About 71 percent of the news in *NST* and 47.1 percent of the news in *The Star* were written by their own staff and special correspondents, while 38.1 percent of *The Sun's* news were generated from AFP and 23.8 percent from Reuters.

In terms of human rights issues, it was found that out of the 13 issues categorised in the study, a greater concentration of stories were on women's need for greater participation in decision-making and recognition, issues on sex discrimination, freedom of expression , violence on women and women in poverty. The study categorised human rights issues into three areas of concentration: main focus, primary focus and secondary focus (See Table 1).

In terms of the direction of news, out of the 107 stories analysed from the three newspapers, a greater concentration of the news was in the negative category (62.6 percent) whereby such news have the tendency to tarnish women's images. About 24.3 percent of the news were in the positive category, 10.3 percent neutral and 2.8 percent in the balanced category (news that have both negative and positive elements).

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Issues	Main Focus (%)	Primary Focus (%)	Secondary Focus (%
Freedom of expression	18(16.8)	12(11.2)	6(5.6)
Decision making/recognition	16(15.0)	18(16.8)	20(18.7)
Sex discrimination	13(12.1)	11(10.3)	18(16.8)
Violence/crime	13(12.0)	12(11.2)	8(7.5)
Religion	9(8.4)	7(6.5)	2(1.9)
Political/Economic Equality	8(7.5)	6(5.6)	4(3.7)
Sexual rights/Lesbianism	8(7.5)	7(6.5)	9(8.4)
Sexual harassment	7(6.5)	9(8.4)	4(3.7)
Research & Developmen	7(6.5)	8(7.5)	7(6.5)
Poverty/health	3(2.8)	10(9.3)	12(11.2)
Education & training	2(1.9)	4(3.7)	9(8.4)
Socio-cultural	2(1.9)	2(1.9)	8(7.5)
Others	1(0.9)	1(0.9)	-
N	107(100%)	107(100%)	107(100%)

TABLE 1: Human Rights issues according to concentration

The study also found a significant difference between the main characters in the news and the direction of images being portrayed. Findings (Table 2) showed that while officials or representatives from governments were portrayed in the positive light, the women delegates and individuals from various organisations, the media, experts and scholars and the security personnel including military and police were portrayed in the negative light.

%	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Balanced
Government	45.0	42.5	10.0	2.5
Organisation/NGOs	13.3	76.7	6.7	3.3
Scholars/Individuals	11.5	65.4	19.2	3.8
Military/Police	-	100.0	-	-
Media	14.3	85.7	-	-

TABLE 2 Comparison of main characters and news direction

N = 107

The study also looked at two indicators of image-building that enabled the writers to detect forms of image creation on the part of the newspapers either directly or indirectly. The

two indicators are the "attributional" and "descriptive" image categories established by Janice Monti Belkoui (1978). A three-point scale was used to code the two image categories. The attributional image category represented the publications' method of attributing a style or image to a speaker's manner of address. Several news stories carried words that shed negative light on women for instance terms and phrases such as " shouted one Tunisian woman loosing her cool", "painted", "condemned", "Hillary launched a scathing attack...", "accused", "urged", and "warned". News that used the word "said" or similar words such as "told", "stated" were placed in the neutral category .

On the other hand, a story would be placed in the descriptive image category if the publications or coverage used judgemental adjectives to describe a character in the story. In this study, negative descriptive category included phrases such as "a Lesbian NGO", "An Islamic fundamentalist...", "Outspoken western feminist...", "Actress Jane Fonda, wife of Ted Turner, CNN's..." " a female parliamentarian" while positive category include "Vatican's top negotiator", "Freedom fighter Aung San Suu Kyi", "Smiling Suu Kyi", "Eloquent speaker". A story that only used the word "the leader" or "the parliamentarian" without any adjectives was placed in the neutral descriptive category.

Findings from the study showed that the newspapers were involved in portraying more positive image category (42.1 percent) as compared with negative image category (34.6 percent) as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Attributive images in the media

	F	%
Positive	45	42.1
Negative	37	34.6
Neutral	25	23.4

N=107

In terms of descriptive images, the findings showed an interesting trend. All of the three newspapers were slightly involved in making negative judgements (23.4 percent) in describing women . However, the fact that 69.1 percent of the news were in the neutral category have demonstrated that the

newspapers have tried to be objective and non-judgemental in their writings about the women in the Beijing conference (Table 4).

	F	%
Positive	8	7.5
Negative	25	23.4
Neutral	73	69.1

TABLE 4: Descriptive images in the media

N=107

A comparison between the direction of news with the source of news was also noted. Table 5 shows that more negative news are generated from the international wire services, i.e. AP (79.7 percent), Reuters (75.0 percent), AFP (75.0 percent). While news from the newspapers' own staff show an inclination towards negative news (56.6 percent) and positive news (30.2). A comparison between all the news sources show that more positive news about women during the Beijing conference come from the newspapers own staff writers and others which include independent writers and news syndicate such as L.A Times.

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
AP	20.3	79.7	-
Reuters	5.0	75.0	20.0
AFP	12.5	75.0	12.5
BERNAMA	25.0	75.0	-
Own staff/correspondents	30.2	56.6	13.2
Others	45.5	45.5	9.1

TABLE 5: Comparison of news source and news direction

N=107

Discussion: Images of Women and Human Rights in the Media

The study of direction in terms of news themes, main character in the news, attributive and descriptive image categories is perhaps one of the most important aspects of this study because it directly or indirectly demonstrates the opinions and

policies held by the three English dailies toward women and their plight for human rights during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1996.

Although much has been said about the negative coverage of women by the media especially the western media during the conference, the image painted by the three Malaysian English dailies was the contrary. Findings have demonstrated that the newspapers have tried to be objective and not judgemental when writing about the women delegates during the conference. Perhaps, this was due to the fact that majority of the coverage was done by their own women journalists and special correspondents.

In terms of the direction of human rights issues covered by the newspapers, the trend was toward negative direction. However, news on women and human rights generated from the international wire services especially AFP, Reuters, and AP showed a higher concentration in the negative category. News written by the newspapers' own staff showed a more reasonable balance between negative and positive.

The main focus of human rights issues which can be placed under the positive direction is the category that deals with the need for greater participation in decision making and recognition for women's contributions in a nation's development process.

Other human rights categories which were also the main foci of newspapers such as freedom of expression, sex discrimination, violence against women and children were found to be more in the negative category. However, in terms of emphasis, the findings showed that the newspapers considered women and human rights issues to be very important warranting a full page report in the tabloid newspapers and half page reports in the broadsheet newspapers almost everyday during the 10-day event.

The images of women and their plight for human rights as reflected in the three leading English language newspapers in Malaysia have shown a promising and an encouraging future for women and their cause, in terms of news direction. The newspapers have been cautious in reporting women's issues and have tried to be objective in the sense that judgemental words and labelling were at a minimum. The images projected are dual in nature , between negative and positive, indicating a reasonable balance and not as "hard hitting" as

those reports by the Western international wire services.

However, the study has demonstrated the important and vital role media can play in image making. Between the three newspapers studied, one of the tabloid papers, **The Sun** has more negative reports of the women's conference possibly because the newspaper used more wire reports by AFP and Reuters and less by its own staff. Hence, Malaysian readers who read **The Sun** tended to have a biased view of the Beijing conference and of the women who were attending the conference. With a negative view set by the media, the plight of women for their rights tended to be perceived negatively. Reading more negativities about women in the media will somehow reinforce the negative perceptions already formed in the minds of readers. This phenomenon is what Boorstin (1972) termed as a simplified image of reality.

Nevertheless, on a positive note, it can be seen that women's issues and women's plight for their rights are considered very important by the newspapers. This is proven by the special treatment in terms of news spaces given to the issues. The study has also indicated that with more concerned women editors and writers and gender-sensitised male editors, writers and colleagues, the images of women and their plights could well be a national agenda.

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