

ASSESSING PATRIARCHY IN LABOUR ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

The contention of this paper is that unions as male dominated institutions have failed to attract women members because of their masculine culture and insensitivity to the specific needs of women workers. The position of women as union members in the structures, programmes and leadership of four labour organizations are examined. These are the Electrical Industry Workers' Union (EIWU), the Amalgamated Union of Employees in the Government Clerical and Allied Services (AUEGCAS), the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) and the Congress of Employees Unions in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS).

My paper acknowledges the socio-political conditions that constrain unions and membership growth in this country. However, an understanding combining both exogenous and endogenous factors (within the unions) will provide a comprehensive picture of the reasons why unions have failed to attract women members. Why is there a need to focus on such an issue? It is important because women workers now consist of over 38% of the total labour force (1990) in the country and the percentage is expected to increase in the near future. How then can their interests be represented? The trade union is a body that can represent workers' interests if properly managed and if there is sincere commitment by leaders and members. Hence, as women become a part of the industrial force, they will need some form of organization to represent their interests. In the absence of a better alternative and since unions have been in existence in many workplaces, it is only appropriate that unions should fulfill this function. However, this paper argues that within the present set-up, unions are unable to do so because of their insensitivity to women workers' specific needs and the way unions are run. Nevertheless

unions have the potential to represent women's interest if internal restructuring is carried out.

Women workers is an important part of the Malaysian work force. Women's participation in the labour force has increased from 26% in 1957, to 30% in 1965, 35% in the 70's and to 38% in the 80's (see Depart. of Statistics, 1963, and various Ministry of Labour Reports from 1960-87). They are mostly located at the lower rungs of the ladder of the job hierarchy both in the public and private sectors. The majority of women in the public sector are found in the C and D grades while those in the private sector are mainly unskilled workers such as production operators, receptionists, and salesgirls. In the '60's women entered in large numbers into the manufacturing sector with impetus provided by the Import Substitution Policy and Export Oriented Industrialization Policy in the 70's. They made up over 85% of workers in the manufacturing sector particularly in the textiles, garments, food, footwear, rubber, electrical and electronic industries.

If we look briefly at the history of women's entry into production in the West, industrialization of the nineteenth century drew more and more women into the waged sector. Various theories have been expounded regarding capital's relationship to male and female workers. Feminist writers (Baxandall, Ewen and Gordon, 1976; Rosenberg, 1976) criticised early (male) labour writers such as Bravermann for ignoring the difference in the relationship between capital and women workers and capital and male workers. They argued that one main difference is the fact that by paying less wages to women workers, capital appropriates more surplus value from women. This statement is relevant to Malaysia where women are often paid less than men in most private sectors including estates and plantations in the forties (Brazier, 1947; Awberry and Dalley, 1948: 57-59). and the industrial sectors in the sixties and seventies.

The second contention by these writers is that women workers continue to do domestic work at home, thus sustaining the capitalist system. If housework (food preparation, laundry etc) is not performed by women, then capitalists would have to provide these services to sustain the workers. This would be an added cost to the capitalists.

Again by looking into the Malaysian context, women workers continue to perform more housework than their male counterparts.¹

Labour theoreticians such as Marx, Engels (1938) Clegg (1977) Cohen and Gutkind (1978) suggest that workers would become "proletarianised" on becoming industrial workers. Unlike the pre - industrialized period when workers owned their means of production, with industrialization they only have their labour power to sell which produces "surplus value" in the process of production. Capital appropriates this surplus value. Safa (1979) differs from this view by conceptualising that such a process applies only to male workers and not to women workers because they become only "semi-proletarianised" since they continue to perform domestic labour which is considered as "use value". Safa's explanation is pertinent to Malaysian women because they have continued to perform domestic work even on becoming waged workers.

This paper examines four labour organizations. The women workers in these labour organizations consist mainly of clerical staff, stenographers and typists (from AUEGCAS), production operators manufacturing electrical components for refrigerators, televisions, radios and air-conditioners (from EIWU) and in addition, women from other unions affiliated to both MTUC and CUEPACS. These include lower level executive staff from the Employees Provident Fund, clerks from shipping agencies, clerks from the railway services and sales personnel. Together, they represent the occupations of a large number of Malaysian women. The majority of women who entered the industrial sector in the 70's originated from a rural background. Most women respondents are within the age group of 22 - 35 years.

Background of the Malaysian Trade Union Movement

The Malaysian trade union movement developed under very difficult circumstances particularly during the Emergency (1948-60).² Development after the fifties, witnessed the increasing "integration" or incorporation of unions into the economic and political systems of the country. Union centres such as the Malayan Trade Union Congress

(MTUC) and Congress of Union of Employees in the Public and Civil Service (CUEPACS) which emerged during the decades of the forties and fifties played leading roles in guiding unions to be "moderate" and responsible.³ Over the years the Trade Union Ordinance (1948) was amended several times and at each successive stage trade unions came under more stringent governmental control. Such stringent control was viewed by the government as necessary for facilitating the smooth process of industrialization and to attract foreign investments. In comparison to the forties when unionised labour almost reached 30% of the labour force, during the last forty years, the percentage of union workers have steadily declined and fluctuates between 10-12% of the labour force. This is low compared to many Western countries which have an average of 30% unionized labour and the trend there has also been a more rapid rate of increase of women members over male membership (Cook, 1980, 1984: 70-1). The situation in Malaysia for women workers shows the opposite trend where despite the fact that women make up about 27% of total union membership and approximately 34% of the labour force, yet only 8% of working women are union members. Taking into account the tacit disapproval for unionization of the electronic workers by the government which left out over 90,00 women workers from union participation (Rohana and Lochhead, 1988; Grace 1990), the question still arises as to why there has been persistently lower rates of unionized women in almost all occupations as compared to men?⁴ The lower proportion of unionized women has not been given due attention in studies by Gamba (1962), Josey (1958) Brennan (1982) Azizan (1989), Todd and Jomo (1988). These studies tended to focus more on the relationship between the state and capital on one hand, and the state and trade unions on the other. The circumstances which have weakened unions were lengthily described and analysed in most of these writings but with little attention to women's roles in unions. If women were ever mentioned it was almost always in passing or as a marginal factor of observation. In actual fact, in the Malaysian labour history there have been records of women's participation in strikes and as strike supporters in the various rubber estates strikes. For example, one of the longest strike was by unorganized women in a rubber factory in 1947 (Josey, 1958: 48). There was also strong resistance by women workers in several strikes at rubber estates in Kedah and Perak

(Colonial Office File, 537/2173, 1947).

The "invisibility" of women in social movements and institutions is of course not confined to women in unions only but pervades most accounts of history. There are exceptions such as the history of the Kaum Ibu by Manderson (1980)⁵ Kleinberg (1989: ix)⁶ describes the "invisibility" of women in this manner:

That women have been systematically omitted from accounts of the past. This has distorted the way we view the past; indeed it warps history by making it seem as though only men have participated in events thought worthy of preservation and by misrepresenting what actually happens.

In Malaysia most contemporary writings on trade unions continue to ignore the participation and roles of women and by doing so, women's roles would remain unacknowledged in any future writings on the history of unions, unlike in the West, where starting from the seventies, more attention was paid to the participation and situation of women in the unions. This is partly attributed to the increase in feminist writings and to the activism of women unionists themselves.

Writings on Unions and on Women in Unions

An overview is provided here by reviewing briefly the various writings on trade unions and the participation of women in such institutions. Before the sixties, writings on trade unions everywhere including Malaysia tended to focus on two major areas which are closely related to the weaknesses of the unions. One is the growing strength of capital and the state *vis-a-vis* unions (Clarks and Clement, 1977). This includes the growing globalisation of international capital. Because of their need for foreign capital, there is increased collaboration of the host government/state with foreign capital in an effort to curb unions and to control labour/workers (Cohen and Gutkind, 1979; Southall, 1988). This is carried out both through direct legislative intervention and more subtle anti-labour strategies

(Caldwell, 1977). Included in these studies are those that focus on the increasing "integration" or incorporation of unions into political and economic systems. Other writings concentrated on the growing size of many unions and their increasing bureaucratization. These included the oligarchic entrenchment of union leaders, many of whom were either too career-minded or possibly even corrupt (Hyman, 1975; Southall, 1988). Even when more interest was subsequently shown in the seventies in the possible reasons for the lack of women's participation, (Hardman, 1989: 1-27) the focus was more on the labour market characteristics of women which were said to be negative to such participation. It was only when feminism and feminist analysis in the West gained some ground in union writings, that greater attention was paid to the male-dominated structures of unions that were proven to be uncondusive for increasing women's membership and effectiveness in unions (Beale, 1982; Hunt, 1982; Cook, 1984; Milkman, 1987).

Similarly in Malaysia, studies on unions were inclined to focus on the asymmetrical relationship of capital and state to labour (Gamba, 1962; Stenson, 1970; Brannen, 1973; Kamaruddin, 1978; Syed and Halim, 1985; Wad, 1988) and the increasing entrenchment of leaders (Azizan, 1989; Ramasamy, 1990). Sundry seminar papers by unionists were the only effort to understand why women were so few in number and ineffective in unions (Ramasamy 1973, Bosco, 1984; Patma, 1985). These paper writers were often quite reluctant to criticise the internal "structures" and leadership of the unions because being union members themselves (and some were leaders too), they prefer not to criticise and confront their leaders. Only relatively recent studies (Rohana and Lochhead, 1989; Grace, 1990) critically examined the various "structures" and programmes of selected unions⁷ to highlight the fact that more could have been done by unions for their women members.

To shift the focus to include gender analysis of unions is pertinent at this juncture (in Malaya) because of the increasing number of women in the labour market, many of whom are unrepresented by any organization. Furthermore, if unions were left to function as they did before, only concerned with "conventional industrial issues", unions will always remain a male domain, and will be institutions stagnant

with outmoded ideas of the "ideal working environment" for workers especially women workers. Women workers relationship with foreign capital is quite different from male workers' mainly because of their lower technical skills (most women are production operators while male workers are found in more diversified work). More women were recorded as unemployed (see Labour and Manpower Reports 1980-1988) and hence provide a greater potential of labour. Preference by factories are for "less troublesome " female than male workers (Jamilah, 1984) because docility and obedience were cultivated through socio-cultural upbringing and conditioning. In addition, the concerted managerial strategies of paternalism in those newer industries of the Free Trade Zones tended to mitigate against union consciousness.

Women workers were generally seen by society, the government and management as dispensable during an economic recession because of women's status as the "secondary" bread winner in the family. Yet it is undeniable that women have now become an important component of the labour force and are equally significant as potential union members. Unions in keeping abreast with new technological development, international capital, managerial corporate strategies and a changing labour force have to reorientate their thinking and strategies accordingly, and this would mean giving due attention to the needs of women workers and union members.

Explanations on Women's Under-representation in Unions

The prevalent explanation given by most union leaders about the lack of women's participation in unions is that the state has been very repressive towards unions resulting in unions becoming ineffective and hence failing to attract members of both sexes. Furthermore, besides women workers' specific characteristics, the labour market characteristics of women are unfavourable for union activities. A substantial number of women are found in the informal sector and in secondary occupations (see Faridah and Madeline, 1989) which tend to exclude women from union membership. This explains the conclusion drawn by most union leaders that factors outside the control of unions had contributed to the low representation of women in unions. This

view may be acceptable to some extent. Nonetheless, I would still argue that although external factors have some bearing, the structure and dynamics within the unions are also detrimental, and that both external and internal factors are intricately interwoven to explain the under-representation of women in the unions. This paper will examine some common characteristics of four labour unions (the MTUC, CUEPACS, the EIWU and the AUEGCAS). The characteristics examined are patriarchal ideologies and relations in these unions.⁸ To a large degree, their common characteristics epitomize the general situation of unions in the country. The main focus is to evaluate how far "patriarchal" gender ideology and relations have permeated trade unions, to see if unions will continue to be a male domain with its accompanying andryachal culture and whether unions will continue to mainly address "conventional industrial issues" which are assumed to be non-gendered such as wage increase, pay scales, promotion systems, hours of work, fringe benefits, and safety at work. Up to the present, most unions policies and practices continue to treat issues related to women's specific needs in the workplace, their low positions on the occupational ladder and their lack of skills in the workplace, unequal gender relations⁹ and division of labour which affected most women workers both in terms of workplace performance and domestic responsibilities, as being outside the scope of industrial relations and thus outside the domain of unions.

Patriarchal Ideology and Relations in Unions

The term "patriarchy" has been debated widely with different meanings for liberal, radical and marxist feminists and is fraught with difficulties of interpretation. Briefly, liberal feminists believe that by advocating reforms for women, their position would be improved within a male-dominated context. In fact within their perspective male dominance is not due to men's oppression of women but more to women's disadvantaged position in the race for material gains within the public sphere. The question of unequal gender relations due to men's concerted effort to keep women subordinated do not arise here. For radical feminists, patriarchy is a sex-based system where men subjugate women. Men are able to do so because of their distinct

biological traits. Women are burdened with their child-bearing and rearing functions. Not constrained by these reproductive functions, men are able to concentrate on developing culture and resources thus accumulating wealth and power for themselves, which enable them to control women both in the reproductive and ideological realms. The Marxist feminists believe that the accumulation of private property by men leads to the final subjugation of women, both in material and subsequently ideological terms, which also leads to the construction of a patriarchal society. From all these conceptions, patriarchy can therefore have many different interpretations.

Perhaps it is useful to provide various definitions of patriarchy here as this text will be utilising a specific meaning of that term. Three definitions are selected for this purpose. Coward (1987: 3) states that:

Patriarchy describes the political and social control of women by men. Here patriarchy promises to deliver the history of the relations between the sexes and to explain the form and functions of male domination.

Hartman (1979: 11) believes that solidarity among men perpetuates their control over women and she defines patriarchy in this manner:

A set of social relations between men, which has a material base and which, through hierarchical relations, established or created interdependence and solidarity among men, that enables them to dominate women.

Walby's (1986: 46) definition is,

A system of interrelated structures through which men exploit women, while capitalism is a system in which capital expropriates wage labourers. It is the mode of exploitation which constitutes the central difference between the two systems.

My working definitions would be based mainly on Walby's since she draws out the existence of the dual system and the relationship between capital and patriarchy. This best describes the dynamics between men and women which construct the gender situation within the unions in Malaysia. In this country, patriarchy and capitalism co-exist and interrelate with each other to the general disadvantage and exploitation of women. The two systems work well together accruing advantages from women workers and women in general. As an illustration, almost all men still expect women to do the major part of the housework (and this value has also been internalised by most women) and this covers women wage workers as well. Women's "surplus value" or domestic work is "extracted" by their spouses/relatives and the state allows this to continue as is evident from the various propaganda extolling the "happy family" ideal in spite of the lack of childcare provisions and other supportive facilities that should have been provided by the state. As in other countries, all institutions in Malaysia are interrelated and almost all are dominated and headed by men. Most major political, economic and social decisions including those for women are made by men. For example, in its aim to reach an advance industrial status and need for a wider local market, the state determines the desirable number of children per family (women are given five paid maternity leave). The state and male-dominated religious institutions are the main parties involved in deciding that abortion is illegal under normal circumstances. As an extreme example, even the dress code is determined for women in a northern state of Kelantan which is ruled by the opposition parties, Semangat 46 and PAS who claim to be governed by the Islamic way.

Other indications of patriarchy in society are obvious in many religious laws and interpretations regarding gender relations, rights to property, divorce and sexual rights. Even in the civil laws there are over 20 laws which are biased against women (Nuraini, 1985), for example, the citizenship law and guardianship law. Needless to say there are many instances of double sexual standards between men and women, normally rationalized on biological determination, for instance where men are assumed to be polygamous and women to be monogamous by nature. Women are also treated like objects and commodities in the media for sales and profits, and in the continued

existence of prostitutes (CAP, 1982; Rohana, 1985). In general, most male-dominated institutions, organizations and men do not perceive this exploitation of women as their concern and usually leave it to the women's groups/organizations to improve the situation for women.

Within the constraints imposed by dominant pattern of patriarchal relations, women workers i.e. from the lower and working class find it very difficult to be actively involved in any organization, least of all a union. Attempting to do so would mean an extra burden of two to three responsibilities. As women are already bearing the dual burdens of waged and domestic work, undertaking another activity like being involved in a union would be adding a third burden. Most of the active women unionists are those who are single, either unmarried (mainly) or divorced (Rohana, 1991). As is often expressed by unionists and also supported by evidence in most unions, the majority of women who are married are no longer active. Women unionists have also attested to this problem (Rohana and Lochhead, 1988: 80).

How are some of these prevalent "patriarchal gender characteristics" in society manifested or operational in unions? The paper attempts to show the various indicators in the unions that seem to support the patriarchal system. Some of these indicators are quantifiable for example, the number of women leaders, their percentage as participants in union courses, workshops and seminars; some other indicators are more qualitative in nature such as male attitude towards women unionists/workers and gender or women related issues of injustice and inequality, and the relation between male and female unionists in the organization.

Women's Position in the Leadership, Structures and Orientation of Selected Unions

Who are the leaders in these unions and how many women become union leaders? All the unions studied here have been led by men and have remained so until today. The main national committee is male-dominated and this is equally true for all other levels of the union. Women who are presently in the committee, normally hold the posts

of vice-president, secretary and treasurer. However, on an average, there are more women leaders in these four unions studied than the national average which is about 4%. (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: Percentage of Women Trade Union Officers in Peninsular Malaysia 1982-1988

Yr	President				Secretary				Treasurer			
Yr	M	F	T	%	M	F	T	%	M	F	T	%
1982	216	11	272	4.0	264	8	272	2.9	256	16	272	5.9
1983	263	10	273	3.7	266	7	273	2.6	257	16	273	5.9
1984	267	8	275	2.9	270	5	275	1.8	261	14	275	5.1
1985	278	4	282	1.4	273	9	282	3.2	254	28	282	9.9
1986	286	6	292	2.1	279	13	292	4.5	265	27	292	9.2
1987	286	12	298	4.0	283	15	298	5.0	269	29	298	9.7
1988	309	13	322	4.0	299	23	322	7.1	289	33	322	10.2

M = Male

F = Female

T = Total

Source: Labour and Manpower Report, Ministry of Labour Malaysia 1985-86 & 1987-88.

In comparison, Table 2 below indicates the number of women leaders in the selected unions.

Table 2: Women Leaders in Selected Labour Organizations, 1958-87

	Total		Women	%
MTUC	37	Exe. Council	3	8.1
CUEPACS	30	Work Committee	3	10.6
EIWU	11	Committee	2	18.2
AUEGCAS	12	Committee	2	16.7

Sources: Unions Records and Interviews with Union Leaders.

Note: Comm. is National Committee of the various unions located in the main offices in Kuala Lumpur.

There have been marginal variations over the years on the number of women holding offices but the changes are too small to make any difference. From the figures in Table 2, it can be said that the average number of women leaders in these selected unions is higher than the

national average of 4% (Labour and Manpower Report, 1985-87). It can be noted here that the percentage of women leaders does not reflect the situation of women in most other unions in the country. In addition it has to be borne in mind that EIWU and AUEGACS have over 50% women members (1987-88 figures, see Rohana and Lochhead, 1988: 34,50) which accounted for a slightly higher representation of women in the leadership. Furthermore, this situation has also resulted from a recent development when AUEGCAS started it's women's committee in 1985. EIWU has not yet set up a similar committee.

Most important decisions regarding the future, issues to be taken up and training programmes are made by male leaders. Input by women leaders and members is small although all these organizations have either a women's section or committee (with the exception of EIWU as noted earlier). The chairperson of the women's section automatically becomes one of the vice-presidents of that organization. Women's sections are tied to the main bodies and whatever decisions and plans of action made as well as funding decisions have to be approved first by the main committee. Hence, their operations are not fully autonomous. The argument of many union leaders about the non-autonomy of the women's section is that the women's section is merely another sub-unit of the main body, similar to the other sections within the structure of the organization. Since there should only be one main decision-making body in the union, the women's section cannot be made independent. The question that arises is how effective can the women's section be within such a framework? How much funding allocation is given to them per year for their activities since funding has to be shared with the other units? And if this is inadequate can they raise money independently to cover their activities? What sort of programmes can they develop that would not be construed as counter to male interests in the unions? Undeniably some form of structure is required in most organizations but the argument here is the fact that decisions made by the women's section are always subjected to the approval of a male dominated (main) body. According to some women unionists (Rohana, 1991: 185) there were occasions when conflict of interests dampened the activities of the women' section.

Since funding for the women's section has always been limited, there was inadequate secretarial and office help to plan and implement proper programmes. The women's section could have been more efficient and effective if full-time union workers were employed. This is vital because most women unionists are engaged in full-time wage work and unionism is merely a voluntary contribution. In addition, up to this time there has been no woman organizer in any of these unions unlike some unions in the West, where the activity of organizing women workers is carried out on a systematic and regular basis. Therefore the recruitment of women workers in Malaysia into unions has been done more on an ad-hoc basis by some union leaders and woman committee members. This explains the low membership of women in the trade unions.

The women's sections mainly deals with women's issues but its ineffectiveness can be explained by the lack of interest shown by the main body and by male members in women's issues. Although most of these unions have women membership of 40% and above, issues pertaining to women workers are given lowest priority in the scale of training programmes and employer-employee meetings. Unionists tend to argue that issues related to workers affect both male and female workers alike. Therefore workers' issues and working conditions are assumed to be non-gendered. To reiterate, the existing reality is quite different because capital's relationship with male and female workers is different which include specific gender preference for some jobs by management, varying management strategies and treatment for male and female workers, pay differentiation for women workers in the past, sexist gender relations in the workplace and women workers bondage to their domestic duties. Undeniably, there are some issues which are non-gendered like safety at the workplace, but to consider all issues related to workers as non-gendered is to conveniently ignore the realities of the workplace and to marginalize problems faced by women workers. Hence, unions have not succeeded in recruiting more women because many women cannot identify with the interests of the unions. The main problem for most unions here is their failure to expand their horizons so as to understand the constraints of the working environment for women workers.

Training in Mixed Gender Courses

Many types of training are given to members in the unions in order to educate them on worker's rights; entitlement, safety at work, trade union history, unionism, and collective agreement. The basic aim is to enlighten members on their rights and entitlement in the working environment as well as educate them on what they can possibly bargain for from their employers. Yet in all these areas, the gender dimension is not seen as important, and if training is to be given on subjects such as gender issues, it is seen as suitable for women members only. An analysis of the contents of training programmes over several decades (see MTUC Council Reports and CUEPACS Congress Reports amongst others), shows that courses having issues related to gender relations and women were not given any importance in mixed gender training. In the mixed courses over the years, women made up to only 10% of the number of total participants. It is only when we include the number of women attending the all women's courses, (i.e. courses specially organized for women) that the figure for the participation of women rises up to 30% for CUEPACS, and about 20% for MTUC (Rohana, 1991: 181,227). For the other unions too, it is by including the figure for all-women's courses, that the participation of women would rise between the range of 15- 30% of total participants.

Many unionists, especially male leaders, often blame women themselves for refusing to attend these courses by virtue that it would take them away from their families especially for the married women. Whatever the reasons, from these training and educational programmes it can be surmised that since training participation is unequally distributed between the men and women, women as members end up receiving less training in trade union matters as compared to men. The benefits of such training do not accrue to those women members who seem to need them more than their male counterparts. The fact that unions do not have any interest in sensitizing their male members to gender inequalities which are the results of patriarchal relations or to women-related issues is reinforced by the absence of these issues in the mixed gender courses/programmes.

Gender Relations in Unions

Male and female leaders and members were asked about male-female relationship in the unions. Most male leaders from all four organizations emphatically state that the relationship was generally good (interviews with V.David and Zainal Rampak, July, 1987). Women respondents from CUEPACS were in agreement with this view. However, a variety of responses surfaced from the other three organizations where women respondents expressed quite diverse opinions. For example, 62% of women respondents from EIWU and AUEGCAS said that the relationship was good while 33% said the relations were tolerable and at its worst, bad (Rohana and Lochhead, 1988). Some women elaborated by saying that men tended to ignore what they said, while some complained that "some men have their 'favourite women' and if you are not one of them, then they won't listen to you". Others said that "some men are very patronising, giving the impression that they know ten times more than you do". Those who were unhappy with such relationships were mainly from EIWU. Most of the MTUC women respondents shared a similar sentiment. The MTUC women complained that male leaders and members often tried to get the "toe-the-line" women into the leadership so that obedience is ensured (Rohana, 1991: 184-7).

Although CUEPACS women and male leaders were in agreement about the good relations between them (Rohana, 1991: 228-9), from the organization's previous records, there seem to be a lot of sexism by male members regarding women members. In almost all Biennial Congresses (from 1977 to Triennial Congresses) all the preparation in relation to food and drinks was the responsibility of women. At the end of these congresses there would be a contest for "Miss CUEPACS". However, this practice was discarded partly due to the Islamic resurgence among its members during that period.

More than this, from my observations at the Congress of 1987 when any woman member would pluck up the courage to speak on a particular issue, that short speech would be followed by laughter from the predominantly male audience as if it were all very amusing. The women members' valid points were thus trivialized. This never

occured after a male member's speech. Such a pattern was further confirmed to me by Santhanasamy who is a long standing deputy President of CUEPACS (interview on 24th April 1987, Rohana, 1991:219). It is therefore clear, that women who play the androcentric game are preferred by male leaders, and that the division of labour by sex is still being practised in unions.

Engendering Union Agendas?

There are now a growing number of women working in the labour market especially in the industrial sector. By 1992, a substantial number have been working for more than 15 years because they initially worked during the rapid industrialization in the sixties. This means that the majority of women workers have become mothers and wives with young children. Thus although there is a dire need for supportive facilities for these working women/parents, the state and employers have been largely neglectful of this. Women in general as well as working women have been subjected to the increasing violence perpetrated both in the domestic and public spheres. There has been an increase of reported cases of violent incidents which include battered wives and children, girls as victims of incestuous relations, and working women as victims of sexual harassment. Although the number of cases on sexual harassment officially reported to the police are few when compared to the other cases of violence, it is undeniable that sexual harassment both by management staff and male co-workers does occur at the workplace. Many unionists and women's organizations (e.g. Women's Aid Organization (WAO) and the Women's Crisis Centre (WCC) could verify this. It is also known that foreign managers and administrators do make sexist remarks to local women workers, partly arising from the fact that they see Asian women as the stereotype of the exotic woman with unbridled sexuality. They may be influenced by the fact that some Asian women are involved in the sex industry both at home and abroad. Women workers in the factories are mainly unorganized and they are quite ignorant of their rights or ways to protect themselves from harassment or sexist remarks. As incidences described above have happened in the workplace, it is incumbent on the unions to take up these issues in

order to institute more "protection" for women workers. When unionists were asked regarding these issues, the majority stated that they would take up the case only if it is reported to them. However there has been no attempt by unions to organize any form of women's groups or committees to serve as a supportive network in the workplace so that women can learn to "protect" themselves.

Most of the unions studied here also feel that these issues are best handled by their respective women's sections or committees. By pushing these issues to these sections which are relatively few in number and located mainly at the national centres, unionists appear to consider such issues unimportant, and they conclude that violence is non-gendered because after all as they put it, violence is on the increase everywhere. Hence, the fact that the majority of victims are women (and the perpetrators are men) went unnoticed by unionists. Even if they acknowledge that men are the perpetrators of violence, they regard these men as "abnormal" or under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Rohana, 1991: 248) Therefore in a normal relationship, between a normal couple or normal workmates and under normal circumstances, violence should not and could not take place.

Contrary to their belief however, so-called "normal" men are in fact the perpetrators of violence especially domestic violence. Thus the views of most unionists in my study are reflective of the mainstream thinking of the wider Malaysian society. They deny that patriarchal gender relations which give more power to men are partly responsible for this violence (including sexual harassment) both in the private and public spheres. Furthermore, the power relations between employers/management and workers, in this case, women workers, have allowed the former to become disrespectful of their women workers and to assume that it to be their inalienable right to make sexual advances and sexist remarks towards women subordinates. As most women occupy the lower positions in the occupational hierarchy and are often subjected to male supervision and management (men mainly dominate the middle and upper echelons), these problems are expected to continue. Since these are workplace matters occurring in the modern industrial settings and therefore are "industrial issues", unions will have to take cognizance of these problematic management-employee,

male-female employee gender relations and work out strategies to minimise and eradicate these problems.

Conclusion

Would "gender-sensitizing" unions be advantageous to unions and their members? By sensitizing one means making unions more concerned with patriarchal gender relations, women/gender issues, generating alternative styles of leadership and meetings, and eliminating andrarchy culture and sensitizing male members to the existence of gender inequalities. This will make unions more responsive to bringing about changes for the betterment and empowerment of women at the workplace, at home and in society. Unions would thus be more involved in issues which have direct relevance to women members and workers in their workplace and in their families.

It was stated earlier that unions treat all workers' matters as non-gendered and have failed to consider the specificities of the emerging working class (women). By treating both female and male workers as if they were alike in needs and refusing to deal with the dual roles of production and reproduction of working women, unions have failed to recruit women. Women too, tied up in their dual roles have not succeeded in representing themselves effectively in unions as members as well as in leadership roles.

It is likely that in the near future when unions can begin to reorientate their thinking and devise strategies accordingly to promote women's interests, more women would be encouraged to become members. Despite the fact that many unions have been "integrated" or incorporated into the mainstream political and economic systems, they still remain as one of the few organizations left to represent workers. Until unions have the interests of workers of both sexes at heart, unions will remain a male domain with little hope of garnering support from the majority of women workers.

Notes

- ¹ For example, studies by Oorjitham (1987: 45) and Rokiah Talib (1989: 21) show that women workers spent more than 6 hours a day in housework while male workers barely spent 1 hour per day.
- ² During the Emergency, many militant union leaders were arrested; some were deported to India or China, some were killed and others jailed. See Cadwell (1977) and Stenson (1970).
- ³ The MTUC and CUEPACS played a leading role in making unions here "moderate" i.e. supportive of the government, anti-communist as evident from their official declarations at their inaugural congresses. They were mainly concerned with workplace issues. The MTUC's earlier development was guided by Brazier, a British unionist appointed by the colonial government to guide the trade union movement in Malaya and Singapore then. The NUPW which has and continue to be influential in the MTUC also play a major role in moderating the MTUC.
- ⁴ Some industries have more unionised women workers than others, mainly due to the substantial number of women workers there, for example, the EIWU, AUEGCAS and the various textile unions throughout the country.
- ⁵ Accounts similar to Manderson's too often concentrate on women in the mainstream political and social lives and this includes autobiographies collected by the National Archive of Malaysia. However a brief history of women in the "left" movement was written by Dancz (1981) which were mainly accounts from past newspaper reports. A glaring absence of these more radical women in most writings was due to the inavailability of written material, some of which were kept as "official secrets or documents" both in the National Archive and in the Public Record Office in London.
- ⁶ Other distortions of history are noted too where most accounts of history are the interpretations of the ruling class focusing on the

deeds of the rulers and their supporters (David, 1989: 60).

- 7 The study by Rohana and Lochhead (1988) was on EIWU and AUEGCAS. EIWU has 54.8% women members in 1988 (pg. 34) AUEGACS has 59.3% women members (pg. 58) The study by Grace (1989) concentrates on the workers in the electronics industry, the role of the union (EIWU and MTUC) and the state's averse action on the unionising efforts of the workers (and EIWU).
- 8 These labour centres and unions were selected on three main criteria. One, a field survey using questionnaires and face to face interviews were conducted in these unions in 1987. Second, these unions have a substantial number of women members and workers in that sector/industry. Thirdly, I have followed the development of these organizations rather closely over many years and in some cases, have participated in their seminars and workshops.
- 9 Unequal gender relations means that in the relationship between men and women, men dominate over women and that they enjoy more rights and privileges than women.

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