GENDER AND GOVERNANCE: THE POLITICS OF FEDERALISM IN MALAYSIA

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The discourse on gender and governance has diverged in predominantly two separate directions. On the one hand, there is almost an exclusive discussion on women in politics where much of the focus is on the inclusion of women in the corridors of political power through the external utilisation of quotas in the electoral process. On the other hand, the literature on gender and organisations focuses on the inner mechanisms of the organisation without much attention to the broader political connections in society. This paper argues that both internal and external articulations are important and that attempts to examine these articulations in the context of the state of Penang, Malaysia, where the politics of federalism intersect with gender and governance issues at the level of local government are worth noting.

Keywords: gender, governance, local government, federalism, employment

INTRODUCTION

Governance entails the process of decision making and the process by which such decisions are executed (or not executed). To be sure, the state, as a privileged site of power, is a key factor in determining whether (good) governance principles and practices are adhered to.[1] Another cornerstone of governance is the integration of gender equality, as a constitutive principle, into the participation processes and structures. Indeed, for the past two decades, women advocates at both the global and national levels have lobbied for the inclusion of women in the decision-making processes, particularly through the use of "quotas" to fast forward their demands.

To date, there have been mainly two levels of discussion on gender and governance, sometimes in isolation of each other. One set of literature focuses on the political processes that examine the role of women in politics and the electoral process (Tan, 2011; Fleschenberg, Derichs and Ng, 2010; Ng, 2010; Rai, 2008; Krook, 2007; Brush, 2003). The other school examines institutional

change, particularly at the organisational level, studying the inner workings of organisations in relation to gender equality (Ng, Fernandez and Noraida, 2011; Kelleher and Rao, 1999; Staudt, 1998; Sweetman, 1997).

This article attempts to bridge this gap by discussing the connection between organisations, gender equality and the workings of the state, as the question of the governance of gender must be analysed in relation to the extent that states and social policies affect women's positions at the organisational and/or sub-national level. Using the case of Malaysian federalism (and its politics) as an illustration, this article attempts to first argue for the need to deconstruct the state in the context of federalism as a government structure. Second, it points to the importance of linking intra-organisational policies, practices and structures with those at the national level, highlighting the need to establish links between these two levels.

These connections are discussed in the context of Malaysian federalism, particularly with respect to the implications of centralised control of the federal government on realising gender equality at the sub-national levels of state and local government. This is because much of the literature on gender and organisations focuses on the internal workings (regulatory, cultural and structural) of the organisation while ignoring the wider political context in which it is embedded. Other researchers, such as Rao, point to the importance of changes needed outside the organisation but stop short of analysing what these external forces mean. Hence, this article proposes to marry both the internal and external workings affecting organisations in relation to gender equality and governance within the wider body politic.

The first part of the paper summarises some of the key literature on gender and organisations followed by a discussion of the politics of federalism in Malaysia, illuminating the problems faced in the past few years as a result of political changes since the 2008 12th general election. By so doing, the article hopes to contribute to the debate by examining the meaning of federalism and local autonomy and their articulation with gender equality issues, including the relation to employment and the gender division of labour in the state of Penang, Malaysia, and, particularly, in the context of local government. The concluding section attempts to draw the various arguments together in relation to gender, organisational change and the state of centralised federalism in Malaysia.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER, GOVERNANCE AND ORGANISATIONS

The right to participate in the governance processes is a universal democratic right for both men and women. In a quest to achieve social justice in the

structures of government, the implementation of gender quotas alone cannot resolve the issue of structural disparities in society. Thus, an integral aspect of social justice must also involve a redistribution of socio-economic resources within society, which includes the notion of gender justice and women's participation in public and political life.

Researchers who examine women's participation in decision-making have identified different positions, depending on their perspective and on the sectors they study. For example, in her analysis of the state, Brush (2003: 6) defines the state as an apparatus of rule, an organisation that is comprised of institutions, capacities and ideologies and attempts to understand the "governance of gender" and the "gender of governance." Others have noted that the state should not be seen as a monolithic institution but "as a many-layered organisation with internal tensions and contradictory agendas where competing political actors speak in different voices" (Rai, 2000: 12). However, it is not clear how such a non-unitary state functions in practice, especially in the context of the developing world (Ng, Maznah and Tan, 2006).

An analytical framework to examine the issue of gender in the context of development organisations was developed by Sweetman (1997: 3), who emphasises that it is important to consider three interdependent elements: the substantive (laws and organisational policies); the structural (processes and mechanisms); and the cultural (beliefs and attitudes).

The substantive, Sweetman contends, is based on a Eurocentric, male dominated perspective of development where women are instrumental in serving development goals and where organisations make a separation between the public and the personal, whereby men are responsible for the workforce while women's primary responsibility is in the reproductive/domestic sphere. The structural level of organisations comprises the "procedures, activities and regulations which translate an organisation's purpose into outcomes" (Sweetman, 1997: 5). For gender equality to be realised and for women to be placed in decision-making positions, women-friendly workplaces and working conditions must be created and radical changes implemented. Non-hierarchical and democratic modes are more amenable to gender equality and social transformation, as they recognise that employees' rights and responsibilities are an inherent part of their careers. However, it is evident that the roles of men and women in society are determined by society's values and norms – the cultural sphere, so to speak – which is Sweetman's third level.

The cultural element consists of the "beliefs and attitudes of the individuals involved in the work. This emphasises the power of people to facilitate or impede organisational changes" (Sweetman, 1997: 7). Thus, while gender policies may

be in place, they tend to "evaporate" at the structural level of organisations. One factor is the existence of "sub-cultures" and "counter-cultures" within organisations where individuals and/or groups may differ with the ruling culture, particularly when there are changes at the leadership level. Institutions are said to have their own distinctive cultures. Thus, it has been argued that it is not easy for new policy advocates to lobby and institutionalise changes, as innovative policies do not automatically translate into institutional practice. These are basically political processes. In her study on gender and institutions, Staudt (1998: 65) asserts that new policies linked with women's concerns face even greater barriers due to "demographics, power dynamics of under representation, and the institutionalisation of male interests in states and bureaucracies." She further notes that executive policies and directives are "routinely ignored or undermined" as they filter down the bureaucratic hierarchies, alongside their informal power relations.

Another important reason for this "evaporation" is the cultural element, which Rao and Stuart (1997:12) term as the "deep structures" of organisations within which one works. They elaborate accordingly:

> Each organization has unconscious or submerged values in its culture, and a history which influences its way of working. These unseen dimensions may move an organization in a direction which you may not anticipate, if all you consider is what can be seen on the surface. In our discussions, we term that which is not visible, "deep structure" – the collection of taken-for-granted values, ways of thinking and working that underlies decision-making and action.

Rao and Stuart further list three important areas of deep structure via the "work life" divide, the exercise of power (as control) and organisational work practices that are important arenas to dissect to effect pathways toward radical change and gender equality. Kelleher and Rao (1999) have created a useful framework in relation to organisational changes and have drawn up four interrelated clusters of change that could also be investigated at the empirical level (see Figure 1). These are in relation to individual and systemic changes in the organisation that consist of the following:

1.   Women's and men's consciousness (culture/norms/ideology at the personal level)
2.   Access and control to and of resources (empowerment indicators)
3.   Internal culture and deep structure (culture/norm/ideology/unwritten rules at the organisational level – institutional culture and deep structure)

4.   Formal rules, policies (regulatory/structural/institutional – capacity to formulate and implement gender equitable social policies in recruitment, training, promotion – programmatic interventions, etc.).
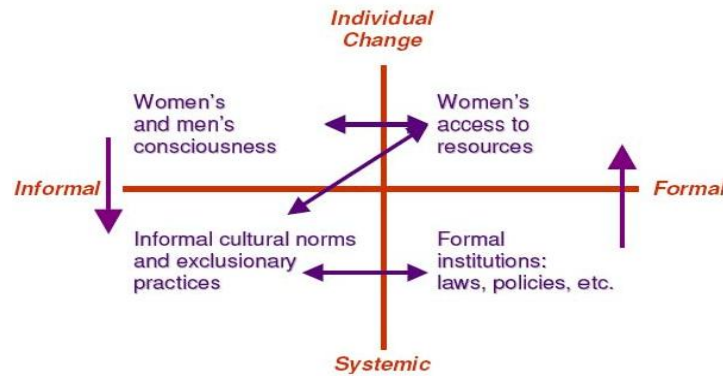

Figure 1: What are we trying to change?
Note: The arrows represent potential relationships between arenas of change
Source: Kelleher and Rao (1999)

Kelleher and Rao note that their framework connects changes in the organisation and the institution to gender equality and is concerned with the individual psychology of men and women, their access to resources and the nature of the social structures in which they are embedded. Thus, they argue that individual perceptions and consciousness (knowledge, skills, commitment to gender equality) are connected to societal informal norms (gender stereotypes) that impinge on one's access to resources (budget, promotion prospects) and formal institutional rules (policies, laws). The informal and formal spheres communicate with one another; hence, a change in one aspect/quadrant will impact changes in other quadrants. Of particular interest is the quadrant on "internal culture and deep structure," which includes the values, norms and ways of thinking that underpin decision making and action, and which Kelleher and Rao assert is profoundly gender biased in most organisations.

To be fair, Kelleher and Rao do mention that changing gender – biased institutions require interventions in two arenas – outside the organisation and within. Thus, they have another framework where there are four (parallel) quadrants that address the external forces similar to the one within organisations. However, there does not seem to be any further elaboration of the links between the internal and external forces affecting gender equality within the organisation, an issue which this paper attempts to address, particularly in the context of Malaysian federal-state-local government relations. A key external element is the societal (unequal) gender division of labour, which attributes unequal value to the

positions and occupations usually held and/or performed by men and women. This occurs at the domestic/reproductive level where "housework" – usually the responsibility of women – is undervalued, whereas productive work outside the household and which earns a wage is more valued. Gender asymmetry is also reflected at the level of production whereby the more "nurturing" occupations usually held by women, such as nurses, teachers, administrators (care work) are less valued (in terms of salaries and status, for example) compared to the other more "masculine" occupations such as engineering, architecture and similar technical jobs. The result is a gender segmented labour market both at the horizontal and vertical levels.

Kelleher and Rao's limited analysis could be due to two assumptions. One, there is a "trickle down," porous-like effect of policies from the national (state) to the sub-national level, which is seen as a continuous, singular and holistic site. Two, resources are shared equitably between these levels – assumptions which this paper challenges. This paper attempts to expand Kelleher and Rao's framework in the Penang local government context and the dynamics therein, as articulated in the following sections.

THE POLITICS OF FEDERALISM AND IMPLICATIONS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia has a three-tiered federal governance system with the federal government at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the state legislature and local government at the second and third tiers, respectively.

Local government, while relatively autonomous in its functions and decision-making processes, falls under the jurisdiction of the respective state governments, with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government playing an advisory role. However, the employment structure is a "closed" one in that posts have to be approved at the federal level.[2] In 1968, local authorities were re-structured and streamlined into two groups based on population and revenue collection via municipal councils and district councils with each local authority being helmed by either a mayor/Yang DiPertua, YDP (president) or a district officer. Penang has two municipal councils – that of Penang Island (Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang, MPPP) and the other of Seberang Perai (Majlis Perbandaran Seberang Perai, MPSP) on the mainland.

The role of the local councils is basically to provide services to its residents. Obligatory functions include caring for the environment, public health and cleaning, enforcement and licensing, public amenities, social services,

development and planning. As noted by the Penang Municipal Council, its mission is:

> To provide excellent services through good governance, coordinate and provide sustainable development, effective communication networks, enhance excellent and quality environmental image and provide facilities toward a dynamic and competitive economy (Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang, 2008).

While the day-to-day activities and responsibilities of local councils are quite autonomous, their hands are also tied due to the centralised nature of federalism in Malaysia. According to Loh (2010), while in other countries with federal-type governances, such as Australia, India and Canada, power, revenue and resources are more equitably shared between the central and its respective state governments, the situation is entirely different in Malaysia. This is because Malaysia's constitutional design privileges the central over state (and local) governments "in terms of legislative jurisdictions as well as in revenue assignments" (Loh, 2010: 132). The purview of the federal government, as per the Ninth Schedule of the Federal Constitution, stretches widely from foreign affairs, defence, internal security, law and order, trade, commerce and industry as well as communication and transport, education and health. In addition, the Tenth Schedule of the Federal Constitution notes that "income taxes, property and capital gains taxes, international trade taxes including production and consumption taxes" (Loh, 2010: 132) belong to the federal government. Loh has called this an anachronistic type of fiscal federalism.

For local government, revenue collection is derived mainly from assessment, rentals and licenses, thus limiting their operational and development expenditures. Revenue collected from income and road taxes, that is, basically almost all important direct and indirect taxes, goes directly to the federal government, which then provides funds (back) to the local councils in the form of a capitation grant (based on population size) and a state road grant. For example, the 2011 budget of one local council was approximately RM250 million, of which approximately RM19.4 million came from the federal government. In addition, there are development funds that are at the sole discretion of the federal government to disburse. Intergovernmental constraints were noted as one of the factors affecting the financial condition of another council. It was noted that 95.5% of this council's revenue (approximately RM160 million for 2011) comes from tax and non-tax income, leaving 4.5% from other receipts, presumably from federal and other grants (Mohd Hairay, 2011). The RM7.5 million federal grants were basically for non-operating revenue, of which RM2.5 million was derived from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government

as aid for street lighting bills, while the remaining RM5 million was the annual grant from the federal government (Haji Mokhtar, 2010).

The over-centralised nature of Malaysian federalism has been discussed by both academics and civil society activists who deplore the tight control of the centre on the two other tiers of government (Yeoh, 2012; Shad Saleem, 2011; Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz, 2011; Loh, 2010, 2009). As noted by an eminent constitutional lawyer, Shad Saleem Faruqi.

> Neither in the letter of the law nor in its working is the Malaysian Federation a true federation. There is tremendous preponderance of power in the central government…In many ways the centre can encroach on state rights without much difficulty.

Such centralised federalism has, undoubtedly, significant implications on the nature and scope of government at the sub-national level. This is particularly problematic when the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (Peoples' Coalition) took control of five states, including Penang, in the 2008 general election. In some cases, federal funds usually slated directly for the state government were re-channelled into other agencies under the auspices of the federal government. As noted by Yeoh (2012),

> After Pakatan took over in Penang and Selangor, several changes were made to restrict financial flows. Previously, development funds went directly to state-governed local district offices through the Federal Government State Development Office (SDO). But after March 2008, funds, though still channelled through the SDO, were no longer under the jurisdiction of the states. The SDO is placed under the Implementation and Co-ordination Unit (ICU) at the Prime Minister's Office. Furthermore, its state-level offices have been physically moved out of state government buildings in both Penang and Selangor, to operate without the states' knowledge.

Where women are concerned, a change occurred in terms of previous federal support (both financial and personnel) of the State Exco for Women, Family and Community Development. After March 2008, these funds were channelled away from the state government to the Department of Women's Development (under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development), whose personnel then re-located to the federal building (Wisma Persekutuan).[3] As a result, the women's portfolio had to call upon women and community NGOs to support its activities. Only in the following year did the state government provide extra

funds for women's activities, while in 2012, a new machinery for women, the Penang Women's Development Corporation, was established (Ng, 2012).

The following section illustrates how particular features of this type of federalism are a factor in the dynamics of gender equality, employment and the gender division of labour in the two local authorities in Penang.

EMPLOYMENT PATTERN: GENDER EQUALITY AND THE CLOSED SYSTEM

Employees in local government follow the scheme established by the Public Services Department (PSD) based on and decided at the federal level in accordance with the Malaysian Civil Service terms of reference. There are various functional departments divided into different categories where employees are located. These include the administrative level; executive and clerical classes; the professional or specialist services including doctors, engineers, architects; and departmental services, which include customs and excise, audit, etc. Within this structure, there is a hierarchy of service schemes that, in 1992, under the New Remuneration Scheme, was classified according to the following:

1.   Premier Group (*Jawatan Utama Sektor Awam* or JUSA)
2.   Professional and Managerial Group (Grades 41 to 54)
3.   Support Group I (Technical Group)
4.   Support Group II (Manual Group)

The total number of (permanent) employees in the MPPP is 2,555, while that of the MPSP is 1,546, with support staff forming the majority of the employees. As evidenced in Table 1, women comprise 40% of the total employees in the professional and managerial categories as well as in Support Group I, but only 3% of the employees in Support Group II, as the latter consists mainly of manual workers, such as labourers, sweepers and gardeners.

Table 1: Employees in the MPPP and the MPSP*

Local councils	Premier group		Professional and managerial		Support group I		Support group II		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
MPPP	–	1	42	22	591	396	1,461	42	2,555
MPSP	1	–	27	16	391	272	805	34	1,546
Total	1	1	69	38	982	668	2,266	76	4,101

* Data until 31 December 2010

M = Male; F = Female

Additionally, while local councils have the autonomy to select (and pay) their own personnel, theirs is a closed system in that the number of positions and their subsequent grading is subject to the approval of the PSD. The rationale is that the federal government pays their pensions, and the number of posts must be commensurate with the available funds derived at the local level. However, as previously mentioned, because the federal government monopolises major revenues, such as income and road taxes, at the state level, there is not much left for the state in terms of revenue collection. Thus, while the state and local authorities have been continuously asking for more autonomy and better distribution in revenue sharing, such requests have not been forthcoming, leaving these sub-national governments under the fiscal control of the centre.[4]

While the local council practises a closed system of employment, the top officers at the state level are mainly from the Administrative and Diplomatic Service (PTD or Perkhidmatan Tadbir dan Diplomatik) whom PSD can transfer to other agencies or to other states, either vertically or horizontally. Thus, for example, Grade A (management and professional) officers at the state secretariat level are usually appointed by the federal government and not by the heads of states. These are federal officers on secondment to the state and can, therefore, be moved around according to the dictates of the PSD.

This employment modality in the local government, as will be evidenced later, has implications for the career prospects of both men and women at the professional and management level.

GENDER AND GOVERNANCE IN PENANG LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This section is based on selected findings from a recent research on women and decision making in the state of Penang (2010–2011).[5] Building on a combination of Sweetman's (1997) and Kelleher and Rao's framework (1999), the research examined the challenges and opportunities to women in decision-making roles in the public and private sectors in Penang. It focused on those in decision-making positions, which translates to those in the premier and the management and professional categories with grades ranging from 44 to JUSA level. The ensuing discussions draw on some of the findings from local authorities to respond to the main questions put forth in the introduction.

As reflected in Tables 2 and 3, women comprise 42% of the total officers from grade 41 onwards, with an almost equal spread between the MPPP (41%) and the MPSP (43%).

Table 2: Position by gender and grade in the MPSP (as of June 2010)

No.	Grade	Premier group		Professional and managerial		Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female	
1.	Utama C	1	–	–	–	1
2.	54	–	–	1	–	1
3.	48	–	–	7	2	9
4.	44	–	–	5	2	7
5.	41	–	–	14	12	26
	Total	1	0	27	16	44

Table 3: Position by gender and grade in the MPPP (as of June 2010)

No.	Grade	Premier group		Professional and managerial		Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female	
1.	Utama B	–	–	–	–	0
2.	Utama C	–	1	–	–	1
3.	53/54	–	–	3	1	4
4.	51/52	–	–	3	1	4
5.	47/48	–	–	7	4	11
6.	45	–	–	–	–	0
7.	43/44	–	–	10	5	15
8.	42	–	–	–	–	0
9.	41	–	–	12	14	26
	Total	0	1	35	25	61

However, this proportion decreases drastically when Grades 44 and above are considered, as the percentage drops to 15% (16 women officers out of a total of 105) compared to 33% for men (35 officers out of a total of 105) for the total number of decision makers in both councils as a whole. Moreover, there are only two women out of eight directors in charge of the respective departments in the MPPP – in management services and in valuation and property management – while there is only one woman out of 14 department heads in the MPSP – in management services.[6]

The question is, why are there so few women at the top levels? What are the internal and external factors underlying this condition and to what extent can Rao's four quadrants explain this phenomenon? Is it a question of men's and women's consciousness of gender equality, access to resources, deep structure or policy evaporation? Or are there other factors involved?

INTERROGATING GENDER EQUALITY: FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Qualitative fieldwork comprising in-depth interviews was conducted with officers in the premier as well as professional and managerial groups to gauge their responses and perceptions to gender equality issues in their place of work. Altogether, 37 officers were selected, 19 men and 18 women, representing more than one-third (35%) of the total officers in the two municipalities. It was important to obtain the views of both men and women to reflect a more gender balanced response to the issues therein. The following discussion differentiates between men's and women's perceptions to the various issues posed in the 1.5 to two hours provided for each interview, some of which extended beyond two hours.

Conversations about gender equality and its various ramifications prove rather interesting as these conversations reveal the complexity of the notions of gender and gender equality and how these meanings are translated, captured and imagined into the lived realities of people. Interestingly enough, contrary to Rao's findings, the constraints of internal cultural deep structure, which she asserts are critical to understanding gender inequality, are not so keenly visible in this study. The normative framework guiding the "what and how of thinking and working" seems to be rather gender-friendly, as opined by both men and women respondents.

There were basically three types of responses to the question, "do you think that women and men are equal?" The first group, forming two-thirds or 62% of the total respondents (23 out of 37 respondents), was rather strident in their responses (Table 4). They asserted quite categorically that "of course they are equal – both are human beings!" Of these respondents, 11 were men and 12 were women – rather equal in terms of representation. The second group was those who were more ambivalent in their response stating "Yes," though women could not be equal at home. This group numbered 11 (30%) with an almost equal number of respondents from both genders – five men and six women. The smallest number (three respondents – all men) were in the "No" category as they opined that women and men cannot be equal for various reasons, such as religion, culture, physical strength, public safety, emotional weaknesses and the fact that men cannot give birth. It would be interesting to delve into the reasons provided for their respective responses.

Table 4: Is there equality between men and women?

Sex	Yes	No	Yes (But)	Total
Male	11	3	5	19
Female	12	–	6	18
Total	23	3	11	37
%	62	8	30	100

For respondents in the first category, the "Yes, men and women are equal" group, their responses were punctuated by statements such as "Women are better educated today," "God created us equal," "It is society that makes it unequal," "No differences," "Equal…in all aspects," "Rightfully, we should be equal," "There should be no discrimination," "Definitely…there is no issue" and "For me, equal...we make joint decisions and perform jobs together, no difference." For these respondents, the roles between men and women were interchangeable, including tasks and responsibilities at home. Below are some of their perspectives.

What Men Officers Say

> There is gender inequality. We should narrow the gap. Men and women are and should be equal. Society makes it unequal. There are more opportunities in the west as promotion there is based on what you know. In Malaysia, it is who you know. Change is there but it is slow. Politically, we are still backward.

> Yes. They are equal (*sama taraf*). It is important that there is cooperation and commitment between men and women.

> From my experience, men and women are equal in decision making and quality. No difference. At home, women have more roles. They are more hard working. At the office, they make decisions; at home they act as secretary and manager – three in one! But now there are no more borders, no non-specific roles between men and women. At home, each must know one's responsibilities. There is a need to share the workload as it can be pretty heavy for women when they also work outside the home. Men can cook. In the home, tasks are *sama* (the same). All this can be discussed.

What Women Officers Say

> Yes, at work/home/family. A strong YES! Before, men were associated with working outside the home and women with working inside home. Things are changing now. Women work and some husbands stay home.

> Yes, why not, roles can be exchanged. I find men are willing to stay at home. Unfortunately, it is a rare case. It is unfair, if the woman has to take care of the family and do everything. Women sacrifice a lot for the family. They think for the family. It is only about people's perception – that this is women's job.

> They are equal, no discrimination. At work they are equal with equal rights. There is no such thing as less work for women or more for men. But if, let us say a lady staff member is in advanced pregnancy, I would not assign her field work for that duration. In other roles, work performance is the same. Both should also share and participate at home. It is not like before.

Respondents in this category note that this is the modern age where both men and women work, and thus, they should share responsibilities in reproductive work as well. Women are just as capable as men to be leaders in the work place. However, a woman respondent also reflected that, in principle, men and women should be equal though reality shows otherwise – "there is still a ceiling." This same respondent also stated that in some aspects, women are also better and that "it is unfair if women have to take care of the family and do everything." Respondents in this category felt that there are many gender stereotypes about women's and men's roles that must be overcome.

The second group differed in that at work women and men are decidedly equal, but they are not equal in regard to the household, as men are the heads of households and women are the nurturers and managers of the family. There were five men and six women in this category. They noted and were proud that Penang had the first lady YDP out of a total of 145 local council heads in the country. However, upon further probing, the respondents in this group, both men and women, displayed ambiguity in their responses as they stressed that even though the man is the head of the family, consultation is important between the two spouses. This "Yes…but" position reflects the dynamism in everyday negotiations in that there is not necessarily a blanket black and white response to a social relationship that is ever evolving and changing. These quotes are from several male officers:

Yes, of course at home and in society, each has their own roles, some of which are official, social, written or unwritten. Our culture dictates our roles, which go hand-in-hand with positions. Similarly, women at home are wives. But now, roles are interchangeable and subject to mutual understanding as couples share responsibilities.

At home a man is the head of the family and the woman as a wife. In a family, there must be a difference. A wife has an important function. It is a shared responsibility. In modern thought, consultation is compulsory, especially if the wife is an income-earner. Even if she is a full-time housewife, consultation is a MUST! You have to have a shared vision, but only one has to make decisions. However, it is a shared decision. In other words, in a household/family, the husband has to consult with his wife when making decisions as she has a right to express her opinions too.

Men and women are equal in intelligence. But there could be different functions. According to religion and culture, men and women have different roles and functions. The man is the breadwinner, and the woman assists the man in running the household. But as more women are working outside the home, women should not be overburdened and men should share in the household responsibilities. For example, if the wife cooks, the husband should buy the groceries or do the chopping/cutting in the kitchen or look after the children. We should not burden women. Islam teaches us that way. The understanding of the Malays is wrong (*fahaman orang Melayu tak betul*).

Thus, one finds that the men in this category actually do help at the household level and share quite equally in the responsibilities, perhaps even negotiating a gender division of work. It seems there are contrarian ideological positions about women's domestic labour and what actually happens in the home. According to one man respondent and a senior officer:

When my wife cooks, I will be by her side, chopping onions. *Kerja siang ikan sudah tender to me* (The work of slicing and cleaning fish is tendered to me). We go marketing together. I have to help my wife. She is also a human being. One has to love and to be loved. I have a special handphone just for my family.

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Indeed, this group also had contradictory opinions that shifted during the interview process. For example, while one respondent mentioned that in Islam only men could lead prayers, he had no objection to a woman leading a local council, as in the case of the MPPP. There were others who said that women could not go out on site as they "could not climb poles nor go down drains or inspect buildings" due to their weak physique and to the dangers of being "out in the field." Yet, at the same time, they also agreed that the issue was not one of innate biological characteristics but one of stereotypical feminine and masculine type jobs that women employees in the council have overcome. Hence, women could be and were enforcers, building inspectors and health officers, even though they were encouraged to go out in pairs for safety purposes. At the end of the day, the real issue was one of public safety and security rather than gender-inscribed roles.

The women respondents in the second group had similar positions to their men counterparts:

> Women have heavy responsibilities juggling work and home, playing the roles of wife and mother. Her priority is "home." I also have outstation work once a month, but my businessman husband is very understanding and accompanies me in my outstation work and shares with the household chores. I prefer to refer to the man as the head of the household. I disagree with the concept of house-husbands, as a husband must be the head of the household.

> I am a single person. If I am married, I believe the master is still the man and a woman should walk a step, a distance, behind the man.

Only three (eight percent) out of the total number of respondents stated that women and men are not equal – they were all men. Their main justification was based on culture, religion or the innate nature of women, which is articulated in certain irreplaceable tasks, as shown in these quotes:

> They are not equal. Women have limitations. They get pregnant, and they cannot work extra after office hours. Their roles must be different. I do not agree with house husbands! For me, ladies as housewives are unequal especially in nurturing and raising children. It is a very important role. Men may be good or passionate at cooking, but women seem to have inborn talents. It is natural for them. For men, these are learned skills, and while

> they can assist the women with such chores, they cannot take
> over.
>
> Women cannot be exactly equal. The man is the head of the
> household, though we must give women their rights. The
> teachings of Islam put men as the head of the family because of
> his characteristics – his physical and spiritual strength.

It seems that two-thirds of the respondents, both men and women, feel that men
and women are equal and that marriage is a cooperative effort necessitating
consultation and compromise from both parties. Roles can also be inter-
changeable, particularly in today's world where both husband and wife often
work outside the home. Accordingly, even though one–third of the respondents
note that women are only equal in the public sphere and that men are the heads of
households, they are in agreement with the first group, stating that men should
support and assist their wives at home. Indeed many of them actually do. Only a
very small minority of men (three) feel that gender equality cannot exist, arguing
well for women's advancement in decision making in both councils.

ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

What are the stances on the next issue, however, that of women's leadership?
While women may be considered equal to men, does that mean that they can also
be good leaders? To this question, there were, invariably, a variety of responses
(Table 5).

Table 5: Can women be leaders?

Sex	Yes	No	Yes (But)	Total
Male	8	2	9	19
Female	18	–	–	18
Total	26	2	9	37
%	70	5	25	100

In terms of aggregate numbers, the number who reported that women can be
leaders was slightly higher compared to those who responded that men and
women are equal, that is, 26 respondents (70%) compared to 23 respondents,
respectively (Table 4). On the other hand, only two (men) stated that women
cannot be leaders, while all (nine) men replied a cautious "Yes (but)" answer.
However, what is interesting in this response is that all (100%) of the 18 women
said that women can be leaders compared to only eight (42%) of the men. The
gender differentiated responses reflect the nature of personal consciousness and

perceptions of gender roles, which will definitely have implications on women's advancement in the organisation.

Voices of Women

All the women interviewed were adamant that women could be leaders. However, they also felt that women faced more obstacles than men, and thus, they had to work harder to prove themselves and to counter the stereotypical images of women as fussy, emotional and too detail oriented. They also felt that it was important that women leaders manage their family and their work well – a dual role that men do not have to assume – as the following statement asserts:

> But women can be good leaders and are good decision makers. Women are more meticulous and not all are over-emotional and *cerewet* (fussy). I disagree with stereo-typing. There are also men who are just as meticulous.

> Yes, I believe that women can be good leaders. Islam promotes women. I do not agree with those who say that gender equality goes against Islam. In Islam, the prophet gives rights to women.

Men's Voices

The eight men who gave quick affirmative responses to women's leadership had similar arguments to the women. In fact, their perspectives followed from their previous positions on gender equality – that now that women are educated, there is no choice and one should not discriminate in the modern world. However, a few admitted that it would not be easy and without problems for women as the male ego is big and there is a tendency for them to want to act with great bravado. One quipped,

> Women can be good leaders. But will they be accepted? People will attempt to keep them down. The top has to change first.

Another stated that we (men) cannot be biased against women. Nonetheless, the decline in the number of men respondents (eight men compared to 11 men who agreed with gender equality) replying in the affirmative, reflecting their uncertainty in having women in top posts in the organisation, was surprising. Most of these men felt that women were emotional and fussy and thus were not be able to make good leaders. This was supplemented by opinions about women being moody during "that time of the month," thus justifying the notion that women were not capable of being rational decision makers. A few mentioned the extended maternity leave now given to women (90 days compared to 60 days

before), stating that this would affect their work performance in the office and implying that career prospects would also be affected.

> Women are emotional, therefore, it is not appropriate for them to be in decision making positions. In Islam, men lead the family, from a small unit like the family to the community. The role of women is mainly (*banyak kepada*) about managing family and children. We need to consider it on a case-by-case situation in terms of women and leadership.

> I observe a known weakness in women as decision makers. Sometimes women are too rigid and not flexible enough. They are also sometimes afraid. They work by the book. Sometime women are fussy and emotional, which impacts their decision making. This is a general opinion, not my opinion.

The above differences in the responses between men and women respondents are an interesting, but perhaps not necessarily surprising, finding. While it may be easier to agree with the notion of (gender) equality and human rights in today's political climate, women's leadership may be more difficult to accept due to the patriarchal make up in society and the gender stereotypes spawned therein. There is more resistance to the idea of women as leaders from men, while women are ready to accept the challenge of being in leadership positions.

Despite this enabling environment, women are still under-represented in top leadership positions. Would access to organisational and other resources be important factors that could facilitate women attaining leadership roles? What about the existence of policies and work arrangements that could support or obstruct women from advancing in the two organisations studied?

RESOURCE AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS: "WE ARE FRUSTRATED BY THE SYSTEM"

The research attempted to identify the bottlenecks, particularly in relation to mechanisms at the structural level that could hinder the promotion of women to decision-making roles in local government. Two explanations were offered by the respondents. First, promotion is based on seniority, and second, the service system at local councils is one that adopts a closed service. In the first scenario, historically, men were the ones who were recruited for promotion, and thus, they naturally advanced up the career ladder when the time was right. As noted by one council secretary:

> There are few women in Level 48 today because of what took place 20 years ago. More men were hired then, and they will be in service for at least 25 years before retiring. Promotion is based on seniority. Therefore, 25 years from now, there will be more women who will be second in line. From Levels 41 to 44, it is a time-based promotion of 15 to 20 years. There is more flexible promotion for Levels 41 to 44. There is a 50/50 ratio of men and women being promoted based on annual performance evaluations.

The other context is that even if both women and men were equally qualified, there are no positions available for them. As previously mentioned, it is a closed system established by the PSD, which determines how many posts are available at local councils. Thus, even though the local government is supposed to be autonomous and self-administered, in reality, the number of staff and the terms of employment of the staff are determined at the federal level. In one instance, there was only one post available at Grade 54, so one had to wait for this person to retire before the next-in-line could be promoted. As one respondent indicated, "The federal government makes the decisions. We have to follow the rules."

An additional and critical reason for this bureaucracy is that the PSD classifies occupations according to their administrative or professional functions. It appears that a Grade 52 is the highest for an officer at the administrative level, while professionals such as engineers and architects can attain a Grade 54. Thus, there appears to be an unequal gender division of labour as women are mostly engaged at the administrative level, while men are more often in the professional groupings, thereby resulting in a gender imbalance in decision making positions. This reflects a broader, gender-based segmentation of the labour market that is biased against women as "men's" jobs are more valued as opposed to "women's" jobs.[7] The study also reveals that the grades available are not uniform as the MPPP has a higher maximum grade for certain functional positions compared to the MPSP, thus leading to an uneven career trajectory between the two councils and the MPSP losing out on various fronts.

Tables 6 and 7 reveal the maximum grade and number of posts available in both councils, with the maximum grade available at the MPSP being lower than that at the MPPP, even after the recent restructuring in the MPSP. Apparently, the MPPP is also going through organisational changes as well with a change in the management company being hired to "reform" the system.

Table 6: Function and maximum grade available with number of available posts (MPPP)

	Function	Maximum grade	Number of posts available
N	Administration	52	1
UD	Medical	54	1
J	Architect/Engineer	54	1
W	Finance	54	1
W	Assessment	52	1
G	Veterinary	41	1
F	System Analyst	48	1
L	Legal	52	1
SU		54	1
YDP		JUSA C	1

Table 7: Function and maximum grade available with number of available posts (MPSP)

	Function	Maximum grade (Before 01 June 2010)	Total number of posts	Maximum grade (After 01 June 2010)	Total number of posts
N	Administration	48	1	52	1
UD	Medical	48	1	52	1
J	Architect/ Engineer	48	3	52	2
W	Finance	48	1	52	1
W	Evaluation	48	1	52	1
G	Veterinary	32	1	41/44	1
F	Information Technology	48	1	48	1
L	Legal	48	1	52	1
SU		54	1	54	1
YDP		JUSA C	1	JUSA C	1

There is a sense of frustration with the system, as indicated by a woman decision maker:

> The men we have here have been here for a long time. Sometimes, we are frustrated by the system. We have already forwarded our changes to the PSD, but the *Majlis* (Council) is responsible for salaries.

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The irony of this situation goes back to the nature of Malaysian federalism, as previously mentioned. Although there have been requests for better career movements from both councils to the PSD, it has taken a long time for the proposals to be approved. The MPSP has asked for their officers to be on the same grade as those of the MPPP, but this request has been denied. One of the reasons given for this denial is due to the lack of council funds to pay for the emoluments if staffs are upgraded. However, the lack of funds in terms of revenue collection is basically the result of the bulk of the direct and indirect taxes going to the federal government. This situation is different from other federal governance models, such as Australia and Canada, where there is more financial autonomy and a better sharing of locally-generated resources at the state and local levels. Thus, it is a catch-22 situation that leads to a sense of injustice at the local level.

Nonetheless, despite the above structural constraints and the nature of inter-governmental fiscal challenges, if not barriers, could not the notion of gender equality already enshrined in the constitution as early as 2001, followed by a National Gender Policy and Action Plan in 2009, "pressure" organisations, including local governments to include more women in the decision-making process? A regulatory framework in terms of laws and policies, as noted by Sweetnam, is important to translate government intentions at the ground level. As it is, the in-depth interviews clearly showed that there were no gender-related policies at the site of local government. Indeed, many were not aware that the PSD had issued a circular at end of 2005 regarding the need to implement sexual harassment policies in the public sector, although several had said they were vaguely aware of such a policy. Similarly, only one-third (13 respondents) were aware of the amendment to Article 8(2) of the federal constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on gender as well as the Women's National Policy and Action Plan. However, they were not clear about the details of the Article 8(2) amendment or about the women's policy. Staudt (1998) refers to policy "evaporation" in that gender equality policies adopted are not internalised by the organisation. However, in this case the national policy has not even permeated to the sub-national level, again challenging the assumption that the state is a unitary enclave of power.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that, in the context of the local government of Penang, both internal and external factors are important in the study of the dynamics between gender equality, governance and organisational change. While the four axes of Rao's inter-locking framework have been useful in identifying and analysing the constraints and opportunities available to women's decision-

making roles within organisations – in this case the local authorities – it has not been able to link this framework to and with the outside forces of a gender-segmented labour market, on the one hand, and the politics of federal state control, on the other.

What is starkly apparent is one's personal understanding and perception of gender, women's leadership, gender equality and the gender division of labour. While the majority of officers in Penang local government believe in gender equality and are not averse to women's leadership, such notions have not been translated at the concrete level. Determined at the federal level, the existence of gender-differentiated occupational patterns also reflects the external environment of an unequal gender division of labour. This gender-biased segmented labour market still privileges masculine type professional occupations such as engineers and architects over stereotyped "feminised" occupations such as human resources and administration, as clearly seen in the employment patterns at both the local councils.

Another bottleneck overlooked in the literature on gender and governance and argued herein is the institutional constraint that limits the number of posts available – a constraint controlled at the federal level. Even if there is a desire to break out of the gender biased employment system, it is not possible to do so as positions are created at the federal level, and it is a closed system twice over. The structural issue is also tied to finance as the control of local (state and local government) funds is in the hands of the centre, thus literally, if not politically, tying the hands of the civil service of these two tiers. A catch-22 situation then emerges with the inability of local government to promote and expand their pool of management staff due to the lack of funds, as these monies are taken by the federal government who then says that there are insufficient funds to expand – a rather ironic situation.

Thus, the bigger (political) picture of the dynamics between particular features of federalism, decentralisation and local autonomy, both at the governance and fiscal levels, must be looked into as these affect the nature of gender equality and the pattern of gender-differentiated employment at the local government level. This is not to say that if there is such reform and better democratic and decentralised processes, gender equality will be automatically realised. The link is not that simple and straightforward. Personal perceptions need not necessarily be translated into policy decisions, especially as the fieldwork shows that officers are not actually aware of the National Policy on Women and its action plan on gender equality. The point is that one must go beyond Rao's and Sweetnam's frameworks to include the political economy of federalism and to challenge the assumption of a singular state apparatus where policies naturally permeate at the bottom. After all, the state, as Rai notes, is multi-layered with competing voices.

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In the case of Malaysia, despite the tensions and opposing voices, the centre still holds court.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

NOTES

1. While recognising its importance, this paper however does not discuss good governance practices such as transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and the like. The focus is on gender equality which is one of the principles of good governance. Hence to avoid confusion, the term "governance" is utilised in this paper.
2. This is an important feature which will be discussed in the next section.
3. However, the Welfare Department under the Ministry remained under the state, but under the state Exco of Health, Welfare and Environment.
4. There seems to be an ongoing debate on the nature of Malaysian federalism in terms of access and control of resources, including in service provision. For example the Pakatan states of Penang and Selangor have been asking for increased revenue sharing from the federal, particularly when these two states contribute substantively in terms of income tax. Selangor contributes RM10 billion in annual tax revenue but only receives RM567 million back in return (Chun, 2012). Penang contributed RM25.6 billion to the inland revenue and customs department between 2001 and 2008 but received RM794 back from the Federal Government (STAR Metro, 4 November 2011). Of course the other argument is that federal is responsible for national expenses such as health, education, salaries and pension payments etc. The DAP has proposed a tax return of 20% as a state's entitlement (Yeoh, 2012). This position would have its detractors as well who argue that there might be an uneven distribution with regard to richer and poorer states. A round table discussion organised by the Penang Institute in February 2012 raised some of these contentious issues in terms of the need to decentralise current governance processes and structures to enhance participatory democracy and peoples' involvement in the country (Ong, 2012).
5. This research funded by the state government was conducted by researchers from the Women's Development Research Centre (KANITA) of the Universiti Sains Malaysia.
6. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that the Chief Minister appointed a woman to head the MPPP local council, one of the few women heads in the country.
7. In effect such gender wage gap is part of the current global campaign for governments to implement ILO Convention 100 within the principle of non-discrimination and equal pay of work for equal value.

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