



**Research article**

# Gender stereotypes in Malaysian parliamentary debates

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## Abstract

This study sets out to examine the level of sensitivity towards gender in political discourse in Parliament in multilingual, multicultural Malaysia. The focus of the study is the choice of lexical words and phrases pertaining to gender stereotypes used by Members of Parliament (MPs) in parliamentary discourse. Out of 219 MPs, 85% of the MPs are men who presumably have adopted patriarchal value systems from conventional families. Given the peripheral and minority status (15%) of female MPs, it is even more important for male MPs to take into consideration the sensitivity of gender stereotypes and sexist language when they engage in debate. However, it was found that female MPs, particularly those representing the opposition party, have to tolerate sexist and derogatory language in parliamentary debate. It is hence the aim of this study to analyze the relevant political discourse to examine the level of sensitivity of the MPs towards gender stereotypes in Parliament. Content analysis based on Hansards will be conducted.

## Keywords

gender stereotype; sexist language; parliamentary debate

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a multiplex and creative instrument that permits subtle discrimination between gender groups. This study sets out to examine the tendency and nature of gender stereotyping in the discourse of elected members of parliament in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Parliament comprises the King (*Yang Di-Pertuan Agung*), the Senate (*Dewan Negara*) and the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*). Participation in parliamentary debates is exclusively meant for Members of Parliament (MPs) who have competed and won in the previous general elections at their respective parliamentary constituencies.

The primary aim of this study is to discuss and analyze patterns of gender stereotyping among the MPs. Out of 219 MPs in the Malaysian House of Representatives, 186 MPs (85%) are male, 33 MPs (15%) are female. Given the prevalence of the male majority as well as their dominance in the House of Representatives, we examined the use of sexist language by MPs in the public domain, i.e. in parliamentary debates.

It is noted that parliamentary privileges are perceived as essential and fundamental to the work of Parliament worldwide. MPs are free from being called to account either in civil or criminal courts for their parliamentary words or actions. The law of defamation, official secrets, obscenity, blasphemy, and of all other criminal offences do not apply to parliamentary proceedings (Faruqi 2007). In Malaysia this privilege is based on Article 63 of the Federal Constitution and section 3 of the Houses of Parliament (Privileges and Powers) Act 1952 (Act 347). According to Article 63 “no person shall be liable to any proceedings in any court in respect of anything said or any vote given by him when taking part in any proceedings of either House of Parliament or any committee thereof.”

When parliament is in session, the local vernacular dailies report on the main issues discussed for the day and what occurs in parliament. Hence, issues that concern public or national interests or of constitutional significance will subsequently attract the nation’s attention when widely reported or commented in the local newspapers.

### *Background to the Study*

Malaysians at large may anticipate that parliamentary discourse should always be factual, noble, highly thought provoking, often reflecting the intellectual capability and moral standards of our elected representatives. A content analysis of the local newspapers indicates that such expectations fall far short of reality and sexist language is fairly prevalent.

Sexist language is a product of cultural norms and traditional ideas of how masculinity and femininity are perceived in the society. Sexist language “creates, constitutes, promotes, or exploits an unfair or irrelevant distinction between the sexes” (Vetterling-Braggin 1981, 3). Derogatory language that violates the rights of women is sexist and perpetuates ideas of what and who women should be (cf. McMohan 2002). Such language is often used to manifest sexist bias through embodying explicit or implicit sexual stereotypes. Well-known linguist Wodak (1989) argues that linguists should study “language behavior in natural speech situation of social relevance”, while attempting to expose “inequality and injustice”. Indeed, there is inequality and injustice shown in sexist language, particularly for the female interlocutors who are under attack.

### *Malaysian Parliament*

The nature of any parliamentary debate is clearly a public domain, where gender equality must be viewed in context with political hegemony and paternal power of the majority male MPs. In both the private or personal domains, gender identity is seen as personal views and values of the speakers, whereby the reaction of the audience reflects their personal views and values of the audience on that matter. By so doing, social reality and identity of the MPs is hence further reduced to a superficial understanding of the MPs as merely 'political animals' who have obtained power and prestige in the general elections.

Another phenomenon is that follow-up news show that MPs who use sexist language, when confronted, would defend their right to use such terms arguing that their utterance was uttered in 'humour' and was not a manifestation of male dominance. However, many of the 'humorous' comments took the form of sarcastic and negative jibes, intended to put down the addressee or deflate them.

MPs who wish to use sexist language when engaging in debates on public issues must be constantly reminded of Standing Order 36(4), that "it shall be out of order for members of the House to use offensive language". The MPs concerned should receive an admonition from the Speaker and be ordered to apologize to the woman MP and to all women. The advice was given by renowned law professor, Shad Saleem, who contends that

...it would be an act of maturity and humility on the part of the MPs concerned to accept their error. Seasoned MPs should show grace under pressure and use wit and sarcasm rather than disgraceful language to subdue their foes. (Shad Saleem Faruqi 2007)

Since majority (85%) of the MPs are male, it is observed that male MPs who presumably have conveniently adopted patriarchy value system from their conventional families are prone to use sexist language at the public domain. Female MPs who suffer from peripheral status as minority, particularly those representing the opposition parties, have to tolerate sexist language deemed offensive to them.

Indeed, gender bias or stereotyping has been a stigma for some female MPs who lack moral support due to a slim minority of female representatives in the Parliament. In addition, not all female MPs are aware of the existence and the danger of sexist language used to discriminate women by stereotyping them in terms of gender hierarchy, physical appearance, biological functions, the choice of spouse and even their sex drive and stamina.

### *Objectives of Study*

It is the objective of this study to examine using a content analysis of linguistic items reported in the Hansards of Parliamentary debates, and those reported in local English newspapers. Does the reported item of parliamentary debates contain various forms of stereotype, prejudice, inequality, suppression, power seeking, discrimination, tension, conflict and protest by the male MPs?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word 'gender' is preferred to 'sex' - which is clearly evocative of an unequivocal demarcation between men and women. Robert Stroller who made the above distinction suggests that gender should be seen as having psychological and cultural connotations. Instead of male and female, the equivalent terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'. In addition, 'gender' connotes 'behaviours, feelings, thoughts and fantasies that were related to the sexes but that did not have primary biological connotations. However, changing the terminology from sex to gender does not necessarily mean that identity seeking process and power struggle between genders has come to an end.

The relationship between men and women has invited dialogue for centuries. Even the great philosopher, Confucius has been quoted as saying, "Women and servants are most difficult to deal with. If you are familiar with them, they become insolent. If you keep your distance, they resent it" (Analects 17, 25). Here Confucius reminds us of the different nature or characteristics of both genders, particularly in the issue of status, and its conflict with closeness, friendship or intimate relationship.

Sociolinguist Tannen in *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) contends that when women talk to men about a problem, they may speak at cross purposes. She argues men talk for report whilst women for rapport. Men use conversation to establish status while women use conversation to establish relationship. Women may basically just want to be comforted and encouraged, while the man may think that she is seeking a solution that he can give to her quickly. This contrast seems to display that men emphasize logical and rational thinking (logos) whilst women focus on closeness or emotional feelings (eros).

David (2006) in discussing face-threatening speech acts and lack of civility in discourse in Malaysian Parliament used the Accommodation Theory in her analysis of politeness among the MPs in the Malaysian parliamentary debate. MPs establish their in-group relationship (we/us) with other MPs who represent the same political party or coalition, and who adopt the same ideology and practice. MPs from opposing political parties (they/them) tend to attack each other, and use social distancing markers to show rivalry towards one another.

David also analyzed the face-threatening utterances in the Malaysian parliamentary debates in June 2005. The analysis found that different types of speech acts are skillfully used in parliamentary discourse by the MPs of different camps. Based on her data, the Face Threatening Acts (FTA) techniques are divided into six categories, i.e. directives, insults, derides, amusement, disapproval and warning. Both face threatening technique and face saving needs are discussed.

The media creates, encourages, maintains and strengthens gender stereotypes. Matlin (1999) explains how women are underrepresented in television, movies and the printed media. Women are not seen much, but they are heard even less. Secondly, women's and men's bodies are represented differently in media portrayal where women are much more likely than men to serve a decorative function. In contrast, men stand up, they look competent, and they look purposeful. Thirdly, the media world often represents men and women as living in separate spheres. Men are more likely than women to be shown working outside the home. Fourthly, women are likely to appear in stereotypical roles, such as models, office ladies, homemakers and caretakers who are often portrayed in an exaggerated way.



Matlin's findings also reflect the tendency of the Malaysian media in advocating the notion of gender stereotypes either in a sub-conscious or unconscious manner. Hence it is this study to examine whether women are debased in parliamentary discourse and the subsequent reports in the media.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### *Data Collection*

This study consists of a content analysis of Malaysian parliamentary discourse. First, three leading English dailies in Malaysia—*The Star*, *The New Strait Times* and *The Sun* were examined to identify what were the sexist language used when debating gender issues during the time parliament was in session throughout 2007.

The rationale for choosing 2007 as the duration of this study is based on two reasons. First, even though the use of sexist language in parliament was reported in the media prior to 2007, it failed to create public awareness due to limited and minimal coverage on parliamentary debates. However, the 'menstrual leak' issue in May 2007 marked the first incident where parliamentary debate attracted undesirable public attention. The controversial remarks were widely reported and fiercely objected by women-based NGOs that demanded an apology. Second, it is observed that after the incident, the use of sexist language was significantly reduced and MPs seemed to take better precaution of their choice of words. Hence, it would be interesting to read what the changes in parliamentary discourse before and after the incident were, although Parliament failed to hold live telecasts for all sessions as a result of objections from fellow MPs.

### **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

Content analysis serves as a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts. The method of conventional content analysis is used to provide in-depth and critical analysis of the contents of parliamentary news with emphasis on both the structure of texts, and the social context.

The content analysis based on newspapers and hansards looks into the choice of words and phrases that is deemed offensive or sexist to the female gender. It applies a critical approach by examining the explicit choice of words of the speakers, which strongly reflects the implicit aspect of the speech—the thoughts, views, values and even agenda hidden beyond the words. In other words, this study will be useful for readers to understand how choice of lexical items used by the MPs can debase and mock women. Besides, it is important to know the context—how the text is articulated, who the audience is, who the speaker is, the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, and who else are listening (Johnstone 2002).

From the point of methodology, it would be ideal to analyze both the text and context in a critical manner. Nevertheless, this is rather difficult to achieve mainly because the context of such debate or conversation is only known through reports on parliamentary news and hansard available the following day. Moreover, the state of mind of the speaker, the controversies prior to saying something offensive are also factors that contribute to the accuracy of content analysis.



The limitation of contextual analysis can be better improved and best complemented by video clips or tape recordings, which at this point of time are unavailable.

#### 4.1. Outside the Parliament

Before examining the implications of parliamentary discourse that contain sexist language, it would be useful to take a quick look at the political discourse of Malaysian politicians that have created controversy over the past few years. Most statements focus on the physical appearance of women.

*“Put on more lipstick and try not to put on weight.”* (February 2003)

Leader of Women’s Wing of Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Dr. Ng Yen Yen and a medical doctor, this Malaysian lady politician sent out the above message to female participants of a seminar, particularly to wives to ensure their husbands do not frequent prostitutes. The above statement shows that sexist language is not only uttered by men to women but also women to women. In this instance, women also are of the view that women are ‘responsible’ for ensuring their spouses do not stray.

*“Wearing a headscarf is not enough to avoid arousing men. Even a very modestly dressed woman can stir up desires in the opposite sex by applying glossy lipstick or perfume. This could lead to molestation and rape.”* (August 2003)

In sharp contrast Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Chief Minister of the opposition-led state of Kelantan, suggests that women should cover their hair and body (*aurat*) so that they do not arouse men. His statement implies masculine ideology—that females must cover their *aurat* as required by Islamic teaching, so that they do not arouse males who will not or should not be held responsible for their behaviour if they are so sexually aroused.

Prior to this, this charismatic religious leader of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) also says:

*“Only women who are not pretty (kurang rupawan) should be employed by the State government, as these women would not be able to get rich husbands who can support them financially.”* (July 1999)

Here, Nik Aziz is viewed as a respected *ulama* (religious scholar) who ‘sympathizes’ with women for having little power over their body, mind and career. He suggests that women who can obtain power through good looks should not work. Instead, they should give up working to allow women who do not have an impressive physical appearance to take up limited job opportunities. The assumption is simple but sexist—pretty women are good at enticing and often end up getting rich husbands as compared to less pretty women. Perhaps Nik Aziz does not realize that the statement is a double edged-sword as it implies that men only look for beauty in potential wives!

*“When you put a woman in a room, nothing happens. But when you put two in a room, there is bound to be trouble.”* (November 2000)

Senai Division Chief Adam Hamid said this in his eagerness to oppose the suggestion to set up Puteri UMNO (a party section for young women). He blames the nature of female as he perceives them as wanting intimacy but end up in quarrels. Women in his view, when associating with one another, only create trouble for themselves as for the party.

The above statements have been provided to show sexist discourse outside Parliament. We now move on to the discourse in Parliament.

#### *4.2. Gender Stereotypes in Parliamentary Debate: Prior to 2007*

Prior to 2007, there were quite a number of sexist statements uttered within the four walls of Parliament. Here are some vivid examples arranged in chronological order.

Badruddin Amiruldin, a Malay Muslim MP from Yan representing the ruling coalition (*Barisan Nasional*) criticized the quality of debate of the opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang using sexist lexical such as:

*“[Your speech is like] a woman reaching menopause.”* (October 1995)

Menopause is a natural biological change faced by women some time in their lives. However, it is ridiculous and senseless for anyone to make a comparison between a speech and menopause. His choice of lexical ‘menopause’ strongly indicates the lack of sensitivity to the natural biological function of women.

Kota Kinabalu UMNO Division Pro-Tem Head, Roselan Johar Mohamed even went as far as suggesting when women are raped they should just enjoy the experience rather than fight it!

*“If you cannot fight rape, better lie down and enjoy it.”* (May 2004)

On the account of what causes rape cases, Idris Haron (BN-Tangga Batu) argues that the way woman dress causes men to do evil deeds. He says:

*“Their sexy dress, make-up and voice will make the male passengers uncomfortable, especially during the boring flight journeys...In a worse case scenario, male passengers who had seen sexy girls on the streets would release their frustration onto the MAS stewardesses.”* (April 2005)

Given the prevalence of Islamic dominance in the Malaysian Parliament, a Muslim MP, Haji Badruddin Amiruldin is of the opinion that all non-Muslim females in multiracial Malaysia would look better if they were willing to use headscarves just like other Muslim female staff in Parliament.



*“It is part of our Malaysian culture and not meant to threaten their rights. It would also show respect to the House. Moreover, it would only make them look younger and sweet looking.”*  
(October 2005)

Badruddin’s statement implies that women need to look young and be sweet looking. Wisdom is not important nor is intellectual vigour. On another occasion, Works Minister S. Samy Vellu even compares women to toilets suggesting they are dirty and waiting to be cleaned up from time to time. He was reported as saying:

*“Toilets are like new brides after they are completed. After some time, they get a bit spoiled. Even if you do not use them frequently, you need someone to clean them every 25 minutes.”*  
(October 2005)

Echoing the above argument, Abdul Fatah Harun (PAS-Rantau Panjang) in Parliament argues that divorcees are randy (*gatal*) and that their husbands had left them because of this!

*Of the two [types of] janda (widows or divorcee) – the divorced variety are gatal (indecent, treating sexual matters vulgarly) while those widowed are better behaved. Most of these divorced women go to parties and are gatal. It is quite obvious why they ended up divorced or why their husbands left them. They are gatal.* (April 2006)

Again the argument is that if men are sexually aroused it is because of women and their dressing. It is women who entice. Men just react but the guilt and blame for such a reaction is put entirely on the women’s shoulders.

The preliminary findings of the sexist language used by Malaysian MPs show that women and women issues are not treated with due respect in Parliament by some of the male MPs. However, the rivalry between different political parties seems to have played a crucial role when MPs use sexist language to insult, deride, tease, warn, threaten and even sabotage members of the other parties as reported in David’s (2007) analysis of parliamentary debates.

#### 4.3. Gender Stereotypes in Parliamentary Debate in 2007

##### *Stereotype I: Women are polluting / defiling*

In May 2007, a statement uttered by two male MPs, Bung Moktar Radin and echoed by Mohd Said Yusof was widely published in all major newspapers. They apparently compared water leaks in Parliament House to the menstrual cycle of the woman MP, Fong Po Kuan. As legal practitioner, Fong reacted after reading the news reporting and hansard of the session claiming that she did not hear clearly what the two MPs were saying during a heated debate. However, she firmly demanded a public apology from both MPs during a parliamentary session the next day (see below and Example 1).

*“Where is the leak? Batu Gajah also leaks every month.”* (May 2007)

Example 1.

Turn			
1	<b>Cik Fong Po Kuan [Batu Gajah/DAP]</b>	:	<p><i>Peraturan Mesyuarat. Tuan Yang di-Pertua, saya ingin merujuk kepada Peraturan Mesyuarat 26(1)(P). Tuan Yang di-Pertua, saya mewakili wanita seluruh Malaysia saya merasa terhina, saya rasa tidak ada penghormatan terhadap wanita. Kenyataan yang dilaporkan oleh surat khabar hari ini Tuan Yang di-Pertua, surat khabar hari ini, surat khabar utama iaitu Utusan, China Press, dan juga Sin Chew, melaporkan bahawa Yang Berhormat daripada Kinabatangan dan Jasin telah mengeluarkan kenyataan bahawa dengan izin, “...Mana ada bocor, Batu Gajah pun tiap-tiap bulan pun bocor juga”...</i></p> <p>(Standing Order. Your Honourable Speaker, I would like to refer to Standing Order 26(1)(P). Your Honourable Speaker, on behalf of all female Malaysians I feel insulted, I feel there is no respect for women. Statement reported in today’s newspaper Your Honourable Speaker, today’s newspaper, mainstream newspapers, i.e. <i>Utusan, China Press</i>, and also <i>Sin Chew</i>, reported that Your Honourable from Kinabatangan and Jasin have uttered statement, with permission, “...Where is the leak, Batu Gajah also leaks every month.”</p>
2	<b>Puan Teresa Kok Suh Sim [Seputeh/DAP]</b>	:	<p><i>Tuan Yang di-Pertua, saya menyokong.</i> (Your Honourable Speaker, I agree).</p>
3	<b>Tuan Lim Kit Siang [Ipoh Timor/DAP]</b>	:	<p><i>Tuan Yang di-Pertua, ini satu perkara yang sangat serius. Kita tidak benarkan perkara sebegini menjatuhkan Dewan Rakyat ini khasnya untuk menjatuhkan nama baik kaum wanita dan ini kira menjadikan laughing stock di dunia. Kita bermakna membenarkan MCP di Dewan Rakyat yang mulia dia. MCP – male chauvinist speak [pig]. Kita tidak boleh benarkan seorang, dua orang male chauvinist speak [pigs]...</i></p> <p>(Your Honourable Speaker, this is something very serious. We shall not allow such a thing to ruin this House of Representatives and make us the laughing stock in the world. [As if] we allow MCP in the House of Representatives [and] honour him. MCP- male chauvinist pig. We do not allow one, two male chauvinists pigs...)</p>
4	<b>Tuan M. Kula Segaran [Ipoh Barat/DAP]</b>	:	<p><i>Tuan Yang di-Pertua, inilah sebab kita perlukan live telecast. Di mana rakyat di Malaysia dapat tahu apa yang dikatakan ini adalah satu perkara yang bukan sahaja memalukan, tetapi memalukan mereka sendiri. Tak kan dia tidak ada isteri, anak perempuan. Macam mana ini boleh disuarakan oleh beliau? Saya rasa ini adalah satu perkara yang sangat mustahak. Saya pun menyokong yang dikatakan dan saya sangat kasihan. Saya rasa Ahli Parlimen Batu Gajah yang telah dihina bukan sahaja setakat seorang wanita, saya seorang lelaki di sini saya rasa sangat malu and I feel guilty and the whole country looking at us. We are the laughing stock of the nation and this is the higher legislative body. Can we allow this? Dengan izin.</i></p> <p>(Your Honourable Speaker, this is why we need live telecast. How can the people in Malaysia get to know what has been said is something not only embarrassing, but also shameful for them. Does he not have a wife, a daughter. How can this be uttered by him? I feel that this is something very important. I also support what was said earlier and I am sympathetic. I feel the Parliamentary Member of Batu Gajah who has been insulted it is also embarrassing to women, I as a man here</p>

			feel very ashamed and I feel guilty and the whole country is looking at us. We are the laughing stock of the nation and this is the higher legislative body. Can we allow this? With permission.)
5	<b>Datuk Haji Mohd. Said bin Yusof [Jasin/BN]</b>	:	<p><i>Tuan Yang di-Pertua, kita harus ingat keadaan dan masa ketika benda ini berlaku. Ianya ketika saya hendak menyambung perbahasan apabila jeritan- jeritan daripada pihak sana terhadap saya dan pada keadaan Dewan. Keadaan...</i></p> <p>(Your Honourable Speaker, we should remember the situation and moment when this thing [incident] happened. It happened when I wanted to continue debate while shouts from the other side targeted me and in that situation of the House. Situation...)</p>
6.	<b>Tuan Lim Kit Siang [Ipoh Timor/DAP]</b>	:	<p>Justifikasi? Any justifikasi? Justifikasi lebih berat lagi, lebih teruk lagi.</p> <p>(Justification? Any justification? Justification [deserves penalty] that is even heavier, even more severe.)</p>

Source: Hansard of Parliament of Malaysia, DR 10.5.2007, pp.1-2 Retrieved on 11 December 2007 from [www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index](http://www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index). English translation by writers.

This debate took place between a few leaders of the opposition party (DAP) and Mohd. Said who represented the ruling coalition (*Barisan Nasional*). Recalling the incident, Fong Po Kuan uses the “I” message to show her feelings regarding the disgraceful remarks relating the issue of water leaks in Parliament with that of menstruation. She was obviously disappointed with what had happened but she was also determined to make Datuk Haji Mohd. Said bin Yusof [Jasin/BN] apologize not just to her but to all Malaysian women.

Both female and male MPs, i.e. Teresa Kok and Lim Kit Siang and M. Kula Segaran from the same opposition party (DAP) immediately backed Fong Po Kuan and demanded an open apology from Haji Mohd. Said bin Yusof. However, the latter defended his right to make the statement by blaming the opposition MPs for shouting at him, hence provoking him into saying what he said.

*The Star* reported on 11 May 2007 that while commenting on the statement, Speaker Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib said, “My advice is that MPs should be careful with their words next time.” This advice was made amidst cheers and the thumping of tables by the back benchers. In turn, Mohd Said defended his right to have made the statement by rationalizing that the statement had been made in the heat of an argument, “I don’t see what the fuss is about.”

### *Stereotype II. Women are indecent*

A debate on human trafficking culminated with a statement of what would happen if the female MP, Teresa Kok went out with a Negro man. The statement assumed young Malaysian girls are inclined to work as GROs and prostitutes but this was not supported with statistics. The dangers of providing entertainment to tourists appear dramatic and demeaning and targeted towards the woman MP of the opposition party. In the closing, the burst of laughter in the House appears to justify the effect of such statements even though the discussion was on human trafficking (see below and Example 2).

*Our children [girls] want Mat Saleh [White Men] or Negros, holding [and] walking. We see, Seputeh, isn't it shameful? Now [if] you walk with a Negro man, don't you feel shameful?*  
(May 2007)

Example 2.

1	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/BN]:</b>	<p>Saya pun tidak faham dia cakap. Tetapi saya Hokkien. Sekarang ini saya tengok pelancong daripada Arab datang dia bawa anak dia semua, takkan dia mahu bawa anak dia yang kecil-kecil masuk disko. Pelancong pun kalau hendakkan hiburan di negara mereka pun hiburan mereka lebih lagi. Macam mana hiburan dia hendak pun ada, naik atas meja, naik atas kerusi pun ada hiburan depa. Di Malaysia ini pelancong mai, maksud saya ada pusat hiburan yang dia boleh pergi ke pub, dia boleh pergi di karaoke, hiburanlah. Bukan maksud saya hiburan keterlaluan sampai tidak ada batasan dan malu kita Tuan Yang di-Pertua kalau anak-anak muda, anak-anak Malaysia kita, anak-anak perempuan kita ini tahu-tahu pi jadi pelacur, jadi GRO, pelancong-pelancong bawa budak-budak Malaysia berjalan. Malu Tuan Yang di-Pertua. Kita tengok malu. Anak-anak kita mahu orang Mat Saleh atau orang Negro, mai pegang berjalan. Kita tengok, Seputeh, tak malu kah? Sekarang <i>you</i> jalan sama orang Negro, <i>you</i> ada malu kah?... [Ketawa] [Dewan riuh dengan ketawa] Kita pun takut ho...!</p> <p>(I also don't understand what she is talking about. But I [know] Hokkien. Now that I see tourists from Arab come with all their children, it is not possible for him to take his young children to visit discos. If the tourists want entertainment in this country they can have many other types of entertainments. Any type of entertainment he wants is available, go up the table, go up the chair also entertainment. In Malaysia, tourists, I mean there are entertainment centres that he can go to, the pubs, karaokes, [those are] entertainments. I don't mean entertainment without limits and we feel embarassed Your Honourable if youngsters, our young Malaysians, our girls somehow become prostitutes, become GROs, tourists take Malaysian children [girls] out walking. Shameful Your Honourable. We see [and we feel] ashamed. Our children [girls] want <i>Mat Saleh</i> [White Men] or Negros, holding [and] walking. We see, Seputeh, isn't it shameful? Now [if] you walk with a Negro, don't you feel shameful? [Laughter] [The House burst out laughing] We are also scared ho...!</p>
2	<b>Puan Teresa Kok Suh Sim [Seputeh/DAP]:</b>	<p>Tuan Yang di-Pertua, apa dia cakap sekarang ya? Dia pusing, pusing dan semua ini tiada kaitan dengan antipemerdagangan manusia.</p> <p>(Your Honourable Speaker, what is he saying now? He twisted and turned and all these have no relevance with anti human trafficking.)</p>

Source: Hansard of Parliament of Malaysia, DR.9.5.2007 pp.103-104. Retrieved on 11 December 2007 from [www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index](http://www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index). English translation by writers.

*Stereotype III: Women are easily influenced*

Datuk Haji Mohamad bin Haji Aziz (Sri Gading/BN) asked the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Health what they were doing about the improper control of trade of unlicensed drugs in the market. He explained the danger of advertisements that fool the public by



exaggerating the effects of certain drugs, giving examples that “people like anything that is pretty, slim, healthy, red face and delicate face”. For him, those pitiful women who believe such advertisements and would end up buying and trying those products, “to slim the body, to enlarge what is small, to tighten up what is big”. Such language may appear humorous to some MPs. However, the statement was intended to insult and to debase women who easily believe the promises made by advertisements selling slimming and beauty products. The underlying assumption is that women are easily influenced, they are not logical and do not have good judgment of what is genuine or imitation, hence they end up being the easy target of such irresponsible advertisements (see below and Example 3).

*Pity the people, especially the women...[who are] very much influenced by the advertisements—soft hair, pretty face, turning a dark face into a fair one in three weeks’ time, that is advertisement. [They] claim that they are able to slim the body, to enlarge what is small, to tighten up what is big. (March 2007)*

Example 3.

Turn		
1	<p><b>Datuk Haji Mohamad bin Haji Aziz [Sri Gading/BN]</b></p>	<p>....Di pasaran banyak ubat palsu, rakyat tidak tahu mana palsu mana tidak palsu. Mereka terpengaruh dengan iklan-iklan. Iklan-iklan ini mempengaruhi rakyat dan rakyat memang suka yang cantik, yang langsing, yang sihat, yang mukanya merah, yang mukanya gebu. Ini yang dimainkan oleh syarikat-syarikat perubatan. Ini sama ada betul atau tidak, palsu atau tidak palsu ataupun tulen ini rakyat terkeliru. Oleh yang demikian, yang ada authority untuk menentukan palsu ataupun tidak palsu ialah kerajaan yang ada kepakaran. Jadi bagaimana Kementerian Kesihatan melihat perkara ini supaya rakyat tidak tertipu dan tertipu ini Tuan Yang di-Pertua, dia ada kesan kepada kesihatan. Kasihan rakyat Tuan Yang di-Pertua, terutama perempuan Tuan Yang di-Pertua, memang terpengaruh sangat dengan iklan-iklan, rambut yang lembut, muka yang cantik, boleh ubah muka yang hitam jadi putih dalam masa 3 minggu, itu iklan. Boleh melangsingkan badan, membesarkan yang kecil, mengecilkan yang besar. [Ketawa] Ini iklan yang menarik Tuan Yang di-Pertua, jadi saya berharap.....</p> <p>(In the marketplace there are many fake/fraudulent drugs/medicines, the people do not know which drug is a fraudulent imitation and which is not. They are influenced by the advertisements. These advertisements influence the people and people like anything that is pretty, slim, healthy, red face and delicate face. This is [the strategy used] played by the pharmaceutical companies. Whether it is true, imitation, genuine or not the people are confused. Therefore, the only authority to verify whether it is fraudulent is the government. So how does the Health Ministry view this issue so that the people are not cheated, Your Honourable Speaker, [as] it has impact on their health. Pity the people Your Honourable Speaker, especially the women Your Honourable Speaker, [who are] very much influenced by the advertisements—soft hair, pretty face, turning a dark face into a fair one in three weeks’ time, that is advertisement. [They] claim that they are able to slim the body, to enlarge what is small, to tighten up what is big. [Laughter] This is interesting advertisement Your Honourable Speaker, so I hope...)</p>

2	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/BN]</b>	:	<i>Setiausaha Parlimen confuse.</i> (The Parliamentary Secretary is confused.)
3	<b>Tuan Yang di-Pertua [Speaker]</b>	:	Panjang sangat soalnya..... (So long his question...)

Source: Hansard of Parliament of Malaysia, DR.27.3.2007, p. 4. Retrieved on 11 December 2007 from [www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index](http://www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index). English translation by writers.

#### *Stereotype IV: Moods, Ageism and Women*

The debate took place between Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin (Jerai/BN) and two other female MPs, Chong Eng (Bukit Mertajam) and Teresa Kok (Seputeh) from the opposition party, DAP. Prior to the debate documented below, he had earlier commented that Chong Eng is a woman who is unpredictable and moody. Badruddin agreed to give way to Chong Eng, emphasizing that he did so because of her seniority and made an ageist remark that Chong Eng was older than Teresa. However, Chong Eng was quick to take up the opportunity to criticise Badruddin and reminded him of his earlier statement that demanded Lim Kit Siang (a Chinese MP representing Ipoh Timur/DAP) to return to Mainland China if the latter was not happy to stay in Malaysia. Chong Eng was rational and calm in her reply. To avoid further argument pertaining to his statement, Badruddin then immediately turned around and gave way to female MP, Teresa Kok (see below and Example 4).

*I give way to the senior [MP] of Bukit Mertajam, because she is older than Seputeh. (August 2007)*

#### Example 4.

1	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/BN]</b>	:	Dua-dua mai ... sayakah? Dua-dua perempuan. (Two ladies... me? Both are female.)
2	<b>Puan Chong Eng [Bukit Mertajam]</b>	:	<i>[Ketawa]</i> Yang mana satu? <i>[Laughter]</i> (Which one [first]?)
3	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/BN]:</b>	:	Saya bagi <i>senior</i> lah Bukit Mertajam, sebab dia sudah berumur daripada Seputeh. (I give way to the more senior [MP] of Bukit Mertajam, because she is older than Seputeh.)
4	<b>Timbalan Yang di-Pertua [Datuk Dr. Yusof bin Yacob] [Deputy Speaker]</b>	:	Sila, Bukit Mertajam. (Please, Bukit Mertajam)
5	<b>Puan Chong Eng [Bukit Mertajam]:</b>	:	Terima kasih Yang Berhormat Jerai. Yang Berhormat Jerai ini tuhan dia pelbagaikan dia ciptakan manusia berbagai-bagai, itulah manusia berbagai-bagai. Jadi ada orang yang dia ucap satu cara, satu stail, ada yang banyak stail.

			<p>Jadi jangan mempertikaikan stail tapi mengambil adakah isi itu betul. Kadang-kadang Yang Berhormat Jerai pun sangat garang juga pun sangat tak sopan juga kadang-kadang menyuruh orang kalau tidak suka ini negara Islam boleh berambus. Hah! Itu lebih teruk lagi.</p> <p>(Thank you Your Honourable Jerai. Your Honourable Jerai God created different types of people and humans who are different. So certain people say things in a way, with one style, [whilst] some use many styles. So do not question the style but take into consideration whether the content is correct. Sometimes Your Honourable Jerai also [gets] very angry also very ill-mannered [and] sometimes tells others if they do not like this Islamic country they can get out of here. Hah! This is even more serious.)</p>
6	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/BN]:</b>	:	<p>Yang Berhormat saya..</p> <p>Your Honourable I...</p>
7	<b>Puan Chong Eng [Bukit Mertajam/DAP]</b>	:	<p>Jadi ingat kita sama-samalah kita di sini kita ada stail yang berlainan. Itulah kita dalam parti yang berlainan. Itulah saya berharap jangan selalu mempertikaikan stail tapi kita debat mengenai isu, okey! Terima kasih.</p> <p>So remember we are together here [and] we have different styles. That is why we are in different [political] parties. That is why I hope let's not always raise the issue of style but let us debate on issues, Okay! Thank you.</p>
8	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/BN]</b>	:	<p>Okay, Seputeh.</p> <p>Okay, Seputeh [can speak up now].</p>
9	<b>Puan Teresa Kok Suh Sim [Seputeh/DAP]</b>	:	<p>Tuan Yang di-Pertua, tengok ini Jerai dia nak ambil alih kerusi Tuan Yang di-Pertua. Ini adalah sikap yang Tuan Yang di-Pertua harus disiplinkan.</p> <p>Your Honourable Speaker, look at Jerai he wants to take over the chair [position] as the Honourable Speaker. This is a behaviour [of which] Your Honourable Speaker should take action against.</p>

Source: Hansard of Parliament of Malaysia, DR.28.8.2007, p. 72. Retrieved on 11 December 2007 from [www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index](http://www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index). English translation by writers.

### *Stereotype V. Women are meant to be sweet*

Haji Badruddin responded to Chong Eng who had questioned him about his statement that Lim Kit Siang can opt to 'go back' to Mainland China if he did not think this country is an Islamic State. In the Malaysian context, his statement was controversial because the Malay political hegemony often advocates the 'ownership' of the land to the 'sons of the soil' (*Bumiputra*). Such ideology gives the impression that the non-*Bumiputras* are considered outsiders. The statement that Malaysians (like in the case of Lim Kit Siang) who do not agree with the status of Islamic State should go back to Mainland China is considered very sensitive and highly provocative in multilingual, multiracial Malaysia. Amidst such an argument the MP felt obliged to discuss the looks of the female Chinese MP and her dressing suggesting that when she wore the Malay dress

(*baju kurung*) she looked sweet (see extract below and Example 5). Such personal comments on looks and dressing in a formal setting reeks of chauvinism and is deemed inappropriate language in Parliament.

*Yesterday she wore baju kebaya and her beauty [is] no joke, but today she is not sweet looking at all ... (August 2007)*

Example 5.

1	<b>Puan Teresa Kok Suh Sim [Seputeh/ DAP]:</b>	: [Bangun]  [Rise]
2	<b>Dato' Paduka Haji Badruddin bin Amiruldin [Jerai/ BN]:</b>	: <i>Stail saya tidak menyakiti hati orang, kecuali saya di provoke. Saya nak perbetul satu Yang Berhormat, duk sat nah! [Bertutur dalam bahasa Cina] Kelmarin dia pakai baju kebaya cantik bukan main, tak manislah ini hari [Ketawa] Saya nak perbetulkan Bukit Mertajam saya memang kata, masa itu saya sedang berhujah dengan Ipoh Timor. Ipoh Timor provoke saya pasai negara Islam tetapi saya kata, ini boleh buka dalam Hansard. Saya kata kalau Yang Berhormat Ipoh Timor tidak setuju Negara Islam Yang Berhormat Ipoh Timor boleh pulang ke Tong San, saya kata, tapi di politicizekan yang saya kata kepada orang-orang Tionghoa. Ini tak betul, tidak betul kerana saya Barisan Nasional saya tahu dalam kawasan saya orang-orang Cina orang-orang India mengundi saya. Saya boleh bertutur bahasa Cina kerana saya berkawan dengan orang Cina dan saya membela orang-orang Cina dan orang-orang India dalam kawasan saya. Jadi jangan kita politicizekan benda-benda ini, melaga-lagakan ini tidak baik! Yang Berhormat saya..</i>  (My style does not hurt anyone, except when I am provoked. I wish to correct one thing Your Honourable, <i>duk sat nah!</i> [Spoken in Chinese] Yesterday she wore <i>baju kebaya</i> and her beauty [is] no joke, but today she is not sweet looking at all ... [Laughter] I want to correct Bukit Mertajam I did say, at that time I was debating with Ipoh Timur. Ipoh Timur provoked me about Islamic State but I said, this can be opened [found] in the Hansard. I said if Your Honourable Ipoh Timur did not agree with Islamic State, Your Honourable Ipoh Timur can go back to China, I said, but it was politicized that I said this to all Chinese. This is not right, not right because I [represent] the <i>Barisan Nasional</i> , I know in my constituency the Chinese and the Indians voted for me. I can speak Chinese because I befriend the Chinese and I advocate the Chinese and the Indians in my constituency. So let us not politicize these things, fighting this is not good! Your Honourable I...

Source: Hansard of Parliament of Malaysia, DR.28.8.2007, p. 72. Retrieved on 11 December 2007 from [www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index](http://www.parlimen.gov.my/hsearch5/index). English translation by writers.

5. DISCUSSION

It is the aim of this study to analyze the relevant news reports and hansards to examine the level of sensitivity of the MPs towards gender stereotypes in the House of Representatives. A



brief content analysis of the local newspapers in 2007 indicates that gender stereotypes and sexist language are prevalent in parliamentary debates.

The findings suggest that Malaysian politicians use sexist language to debase women in various ways. Some MPs regard women as dirty, polluting and defiling. Some view women as indecent, and that women are emotional. They think women are easily influenced, and often create trouble for themselves due to poor judgment. Women should know how to behave and dress appropriately i.e. to cover up their body and not expose their hair, so that they look sweet but at the same time their dressing and voice must not be such that they entice male into sinful intimacy. According to these MPs, wives too should look good to keep their husbands loyal and not frequent prostitutes. This is indeed a gendered viewpoint.

The findings show the paradox of masculinity of male MPs towards the female MPs. Female MPs in particular and women in general are debased due to gender stereotypes as seen in comments focusing on age, marital status, physical appearance, biological functions, mood swings, low self-esteem and immaturity to make sensible decisions.

Offensive, sexist and stereotyped language usage, to a large extent, often reveals deep-rooted feelings or attitudes towards the target audience. Upon hearing sexist remarks targeting a female MP, male and female MPs from the rival political parties often do not respond to it. This is particularly so when the statement is made by MPs from their own political party, in other words, their political comrades.

This clearly shows that gender stereotypes are dealt with not gender *per se* but with political ideology instead. MPs who made sexist statements sometimes received positive feedback from other MPs such as laughter and cheers, indicating their views were endorsed by the others. MPs who react to such offensive language with laughter, applause or criticism, too, reflect their sexist views. Consequently they endorsed sexist language of their fellow MPs. It is unfortunate that some political leaders who use sexist language in Parliament are also rather popular within and outside the parliament and are not been warned or penalized by the Speaker for such sexist comments

### *Emerging public awareness of gender stereotypes*

In May 2007, the utterance of two male MPs representing UMNO was widely reported in the local newspapers and created havoc in and outside the Parliament. The sexist language used in the “menstrual leak” incident seemed to have captured the attention of the public as well as the women activists. Judging from the feedback of the readers of English newspapers, the public expressed their dismay and disapproval of such sexist remarks. We quote some of the comments from the public who wrote in, emailed or used short message (sms) to express their views on that issue.

Below are some selected letters to editors received by The New Straits Times on 18 May 2007 with regard to sexist language used by MPs in parliamentary debate.

*It is the hope of the millions of citizens of our country and, more particularly, our women that the MPs who have tarnished our parliament will have the courage to admit their serious*



*error and apologize both to their fellow MPs as well as to all women. (National Council of Women's Organizations, NCWO)*

*As respected and responsible people's representatives, they should have the common sense and integrity to acknowledge a mistake has been committed. (T.A.K.)*

*I was totally appalled by the sexist remarks made by Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin and Datuk Mohd Said Yusuf and even more so about those who defended them and called those remarks a 'joke'. (Rev K. K. Soong)*

*I was disgusted with the comments made by Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin and Datuk Mohd Said Yusuf about the MP for Batu Gajah. It was equally shocking to read reports that Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz had said no apology towards the affected MP is required. Can saying sorry be that difficult? (Simon Hong)*

*Women make up almost 50 per cent of the voters nowadays. Women from all walks of life have come out in full force to show their dissatisfaction. MPs who make crude jokes on gender issues must not be given another chance. Women voters must shun them. Let us show the power of women. Enough is enough. (G. Vimalah Nair)*

*It is such a humiliation to the nation to have such irresponsible elected representatives. It is more disheartening to hear and know that some fellow MPs find those remarks funny. I can assure you if either Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin and Datuk Mohd Said Yusuf stands for election in my area, I would vote against them. (Sridhar S)*

Here are some selected SMS received by *The Star* and published on Mother's Day (13 May 2007) with regard to the readers' comments on MPs who use sexist language in parliamentary debate.

*It's Mother's Day but Jasin and Kinabatangan MPs' remark insulted all women, include their own mums!*

*It's a shame we have sexist MPs but even more shameful they are not punished, just because they are from ruling party.*

*Wonder if the same remark is used on loved ones of those people who say it's a JOKE. Will they laugh about it?*

*MPs who cracked sexist jokes have no dignity! A disgrace to their wives & daughters. Voters please remember such people should have no place in Parliament!*

*What a disrespectful remark made by those MPs. Take action against them. Teach them how to show some respect for the women.*

*Shame on Datuk Bung Mokhtar. I can't foresee Malaysia as a developed nation with MP like him around.*

The public who wrote in to the English newspapers in May 2007 strongly criticized MPs who used sexist remarks in Parliament. To them, sexist language should not be seen as jokes, because such statement is 'shameful', 'disgraceful', 'disgusting', 'disrespectful', 'irresponsible', 'humiliating', 'shocking', 'disheartening', 'lack of integrity' and 'without dignity'. Judging from the overwhelming negative feedback from the readers, the 'silent majority' seems to have taken the opportunity to speak their minds loud and clear. The message is clear, they are angry and/or unhappy with MPs who use derogatory lexical to debase, deface and degrade women, particularly female MPs in Parliament. As a form of protest and punishment, a few readers even urged that voters should vote against and cast out irresponsible MPs who use sexist language in the future general elections.

Female MPs from both the ruling coalition and the opposition parties were quick to react to sexist statements that took the form of sarcastic and negative jibes, intended to put down the addressee or deflate them. After weeks of polemics, the power struggle between the genders later transformed into compromise within the ruling hegemony when the two MPs finally apologized to the Minister of Women, Family and Community Service. Unfortunately this apology was not addressed to the opposition woman MP who was the focus of these sexist comments.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study found that gender stereotypes articulated in the form of sexist language exists in Malaysian parliamentary debates. Sexist comments targeting female MPs that have been made public in the local media have in turn instilled awareness among the people about the problems faced by minority female MPs. It is hoped that this study will be a starting point for more sociolinguistic studies which critically examine discourses and power struggle between male and female MPs in the Malaysian Parliament.

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