

## “To Denigrate an Adversary, We Assign Unfavourable Labels to Them”: The Political Challenges Among Chinese Women in Peninsular Malaysia

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### Abstract

The experiences among women in Malaya have led them to act as agents of social change, forcing them to confront colonizers and foreign occupations that successfully ignited their spirits to bring about changes in society and the country. Women’s experiences in Malaysia differ from those in other countries who have struggled for political rights, such as the right to vote - as seen through the Western women’s suffrage movement. Therefore, women’s experiences vary depending on various multidimensional aspects. A plural society with multifaceted factors such as ethnicity, religion, and culture has provided different experiences to each individual, including in the political context. We discuss the challenges faced by Chinese women in politics in Peninsular Malaysia. We assert that these political challenges have affected women’s involvement in politics, which is still perceived to be low - evident through the number of Chinese women in the Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies (DUN), and decision-making levels within political parties. Although a 30 percent quota system for women has been implemented in parties that frequently receive support from the Chinese community in Malaysia, specifically the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), women have not been able to meet this quota. We employed a qualitative approach by conducting intensive interviews with ten informants, including Chinese female political representatives as primary informants, male politicians, academics, and activists from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). We untangle that the political challenges faced by Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia consist of gender competition, cronyism, political interest, time management issues, racial sentiments, sexist statements, male domination, political rivals, and political ideologies. The political challenges intersect and clash as outlined by the intersectionality theory, thereby affecting the political participation of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia.

Keywords: Chinese Women; Intersectionality; Political Challenges; Political Involvement; Peninsular Malaysia

### Introduction

In earlier times, Eastern countries more readily accepted women’s roles in public spaces than Western countries- the phenomenon can be observed through the involvement of women in Malaya before independence. For instance, women participated in mass demonstrations against the Malayan Union in 1946.<sup>1</sup> The experiences among women in Malaya have led them to act as agents of social change, confronting colonizers and foreign occupation, which successfully stirred their spirit to change society and the nation.<sup>2</sup> However, the early struggles and movements of women in Malaysia went through

diverse, complex processes and divided into different strands of feminism - the differences in feminist thought stem from influenced factors such as religion, culture, political character, and economic status. Ideological differences have also led to the feminist movement in Malaysia often failing to reach a consensus in presenting a unified women's voice since the colonial era- because women's thought systems are bound and varied based on ideological, racial, cultural, and class factors.

Women in Malaysia have different experiences from those in other countries who actively fought for political rights, such as the right to vote. The rise of the women's suffrage movement in Western countries exemplifies this- hence, we emphatically state that various multidimensional aspects influence the variation in women's experiences.

We seize the opportunity in this study to explore the complex intersections of these multidimensional factors and their impact on women's political experiences in Malaysia. By applying Crenshaw's<sup>3</sup> intersectionality theory, we aim to show how ethnicity, history, culture, and religion contribute to women's diverse and unique political experiences in this context. Crenshaw criticizes the anti-discrimination laws introduced by the United States government for the failure to recognize that Black women face discrimination not only based on sexism but also on ethnicity. Crenshaw argues that no group of women experiences discrimination in the same way. It is irrelevant to address issues related to sexism without considering the racial issues faced by Black women in the United States. Undoubtedly, the laws fail to provide fair and equitable protection to Black women in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Gender and ethnicity, as argued by Crenshaw<sup>5</sup>, are critical factors prioritized in discussions of women's oppression and race-based sentiments. Emphasis on these factors has formed the basis of oppression, often neglecting other important factors. However, this phenomenon has been criticized by many scholars because gender and ethnicity are not the only factors that provide different experiences for women. Other factors, such as class, religion, and patriarchal culture, influence their experiences.<sup>6</sup> As a country that practices democracy and upholds democratic values, Malaysia should grant its citizens, including women, the freedom to advocate for their empowerment and make their efforts and contributions to society, institutions, and the nation more prominent.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, discrimination against women based on biological and physical factors violates the principles of democracy, which are freedom and justice. Any oppression and efforts to limit individual freedom in life influenced by gender, ethnicity, religion, or skin color deviate from the practices of a democratic system.

We consider these multidimensional factors, focusing on the political challenges among Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. The political difficulties that Chinese women encounter indeed influence their political behavior and involvement. Chinese women's political participation in Malaysia remains low, as evidenced by the percentage of Chinese women in the Dewan Rakyat, which was 4.5% in the 14th General Election and decreased to 3.6% in the 15th General Election. Meanwhile, the percentage of Chinese women in the State Legislative Assembly was 3.4% in the 14th General Election, increasing to 4.6% in the 15th General Election. We illustrated in Table 1.0 the percentages of Chinese women in the Dewan Rakyat and State Legislative Assembly.

Despite efforts by political parties such as DAP, MCA, and PKR to implement a 30% quota system for women in party leadership, achieving this target remains a significant challenge. While women in Malaysia are, on average, more educated than men, their representation in political spheres remains unencouraging, including among Chinese women. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, 48.44% of women in the country enter higher education institutions, compared to just 37.05% of men. This higher educational attainment highlights the untapped potential of women in the political arena. However, the gap in political participation persists, underscoring the need to address educational disparities and the more profound structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's participation in politics.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1: Percentage of Chinese Ethnic Women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (DUN) General Elections 12th to 15th

	General Elections-12	General Elections -13	General Elections -14	General Elections -15
House of Representatives	4.0	2.3	4.5	3.6
State Legislative Assemblies	2.6	3.8	3.4	4.6

Source: Malaysian Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies & Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development

We intend to study the political challenges among Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia and their implications for political participation in the region. Research on the political involvement of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia still needs to be completed, especially in evaluating the multidimensional impact highlighted by the theory of intersectionality using a political challenges framework. We should avoid overlooking research on the political involvement of Chinese women, as they play a significant role not only in their families and communities but also in socio-economic development and the country’s political stability. We emphasize that the findings can be utilized by the government and political parties to improve the political participation of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia, given that many in this group are starting to contest and win seats in elections.

**Political Challenges and Political Participation in the Context of Gender and Ethnicity in Malaysia**

The challenges faced by women in empowering women’s political participation include party structures dominated by male representatives, limited opportunities for women to hold leadership positions within parties, and societal stereotypes that perpetually question women’s capabilities.<sup>9</sup> According to Fatimi Hanafi,<sup>10</sup> among the political challenges encountered by Malay women in Malaysia are married female politicians often labeled as bad mothers for supposedly neglecting their families. On the other hand, male politicians usually ridicule and discriminate against unmarried female politicians in Parliament. The low political participation among Negative perceptions of politics, including the prevalence of dirty political practices such as backstabbing, factionalism, and the tendency to denigrate one another, also influence the low political participation among Malay women. The rapid pace of information technology challenges Malay female politicians as misinformation spreads through social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and Instagram. Hence, the swift dissemination of information through these channels can serve as a medium for spreading fake news that can undermine female and male politicians.

We can also examine Zaireeni Azmi’s<sup>11</sup> study on the participation of Muslim women (Muslimat) in PAS politics during the 14th General Election. Her research highlights an increase in female PAS candidates during this election. However, female candidates comprised only 6.9 percent of the total, significantly lower than their male counterparts- this disparity indicates the persistent dominance of men within the PAS party. The contributions of female PAS members have yet to translate into a substantial number of candidacies.

Female candidates were often placed in difficult-to-win seats, resulting in their failure to increase the number of seats for PAS. Despite the increase in female PAS candidates from 2004 to the 2018 elections, female PAS members continue to face numerous challenges, including socio-cultural barriers, party structures, patriarchal values, and the development of self-capabilities, all of which affect their involvement in decision-making levels. According to Zaireeni Azmi, PAS should

encourage, create opportunities for, and strategically support female leadership in the future to enable them to compete effectively within Malaysia's democratic framework.

The gendered roles of men and women in the family and social sphere give rise to the primary challenges encountered by women within political parties. These roles, which dictate expectations such as women's responsibilities as mothers, wives, and caretakers, juxtaposed with the perception of men as more fitting leaders, underscore how deeply ingrained gender norms are within the fabric of politics and its institutions. Such norms have solidified into conventions that shape the participation of both men and women within political parties- disheartening these entrenched norms persist unabated despite the country's modernization and development. A political landscape that reinforces male dominance and exacerbates the hurdles confronting women, perpetuating their marginalization in leadership roles and decision-making bodies- enhances the necessity for deconstructing these norms, as without such deconstruction, women's political aspirations and ambitions will remain unrealized. The amalgamation of factors such as gender stereotyping, women's agency, party structure, the intersectionality of age and gender, and the limited political efficacy among women collectively contribute to rendering leadership in politics a formidable challenge for women.<sup>12</sup>

There are three levels of Chinese women's involvement in activism in Malaya. The first stage began in the early 19th century, characterized by the awareness of elite and intellectual women from the Straits Chinese community who had received an English education. The second stage, from 1925 to 1940, marked a period of awakening that saw women from various social strata, including ordinary citizens, engaging in activism and politics. The third stage, from 1941 to 1957, witnessed Chinese women actively participating in national politics in Malaya, where they were collectively involved in the political movement demanding independence from British colonial rule.<sup>13</sup>

Women's political involvement within the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) has been low- this phenomenon is evident from the 1961 MCA Annual Report, which showed that none of the 12 MCA subcommittee members were women. However, after Ling Leong Sik became the President of MCA, he demonstrated a strong commitment to women's issues. Many women in the MCA began to gain positions both within and outside the party. This shift was more pronounced than women's situation in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). For instance, Phang Ooi Choo, a former senior officer at the Ministry of Public Works, was transferred to the Ministry of Transport, where her talents were nurtured and tested by Ling Leong Sik, then the minister. Subsequently, she was appointed General Manager of the Port Klang Authority in 1997.

Ng Lay Swee was appointed the first president of Tunku Abdul Rahman University (UTAR), making her the first Chinese and Malaysian woman to hold the highest academic position in a local university. Furthermore, Ng Yen Yen was appointed Vice President of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). Ng Yen Yen states that political power heavily influences the appointment of women to high-ranking positions. Despite having qualified female candidates, without political pressure, the 'glass ceiling' impedes women's advancement, making it challenging for them to attain significant roles.<sup>14</sup>

Previous studies discussing the involvement of Chinese women in politics and the factors and challenges influencing their political participation are limited, with many studies focusing on indigenous populations. Ethnicity may influence the increase in the number of Chinese women because if Malaysia remains a country led predominantly by Malay leadership, it will also affect the political involvement of Chinese women in Malaysia. Involving up to 30 percent of women must take ethnic elements into account.

### Conceptual Framework: Intersectionality and Political Involvement



Figure 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.

Sources: Authors' Illustration.

We illustrate the operationalization of concepts and theories used in the study in Figure 1. The intersectionality theory discusses the indicators of political challenges that have influenced individuals' perceptions and political behavior, subsequently shaping the political behavior of community groups and manifested through political participation among Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. Political challenges intersect and correlate, impacting Chinese women's political behavior and participation in Peninsular Malaysia. The intersectionality theory emphasizes that we cannot separate different dimensions of social life into distinct and isolated strands. Crenshaw<sup>15</sup> utilized the concept of intersectionality to understand how the intersectional relationship between gender and race limited black women in the labor market in the United States. The lack of understanding regarding these intersecting factors resulted in experiences of discrimination for black women. Furthermore, dominant or majority identity groups have often excluded or marginalized those with different or minority identities.

On the other hand, Bilge and Collins<sup>16</sup> define intersectionality theory as a way of understanding and analyzing the world through the complex contexts of individual and human experiences. A single factor and multiple factors shape events, and social and political lives influence one another. Aurora Levins Morales also argues that women's experiences constantly change over time and suggests portraying women in a multidimensional context, where their experiences must be associated with aspects such as ethnicity, skin color, age, social class, culture, history, geographic location, language, and citizenship status.<sup>17</sup> These political challenges subsequently influence Chinese women's behavior and political participation in Peninsular Malaysia. Political behavior involves individual actions that encompass not only actions but also orientations towards those actions (identification, demands, expectations, evaluations).<sup>18</sup> Political behavior entails fundamental questions about political capabilities, including their level of knowledge, understanding, and interest in political matters.<sup>19</sup> Individual political behavior shapes group political behavior, which then translates into political participation.

The definition of political participation has evolved through research. Therefore, the definition of political participation also frequently changes due to various perceptions provided by political scholars. According to Verba and Nie,<sup>20</sup> political participation encompasses acts that aim to influence the government, either by affecting the selection of government personnel or by controlling the decisions made by government personnel. Political participation includes a broad spectrum of activities where individuals formulate and articulate their perspectives on global affairs and governance, striving to engage in decision-making processes that impact their lives. These activities range from personal contemplation on topics like disability or broader social concerns at the individual or familial level to involvement in advocacy groups or similar entities and active campaigning at local, regional, or national levels- it encompasses engagement in formal political processes such as voting, party affiliation, or election candidacy.<sup>21</sup>

Political participation manifests through diverse potential activities, including voting, engaging in lawful public demonstrations, and involvement in political parties or advocacy groups- this participation is categorized into four levels: none, weak, moderate, and vigorous.<sup>22</sup> The level of political participation tends to increase with the degree of democracy in a nation. Milbrath<sup>23</sup> introduced



a hierarchical structure to comprehend political participation, depicted as a pyramid divided into three sections: spectator activities (like voting and displaying support), transitional activities (such as donating to a party or attending rallies), and gladiatorial activities (like active party membership and holding office).

## Research Design

We employ a qualitative research methodology, utilizing intensive interview techniques and secondary data collection. Several procedures were undertaken before conducting interviews to ensure effective data collection and to meet the study’s objectives. Initially, we identified potential interview subjects through online resources and personal contacts. Subsequently, we sent formal requests via email, including the interview questions. Upon receiving consent from the informants, we scheduled interviews at mutually agreed times and locations. The intensive interviews were guided by semi-structured questions to ensure uniformity in the information obtained to address the research questions. The names of the informants remain confidential to uphold the principle of anonymity, ensuring their safety and allowing them the freedom to share unrestricted opinions and experiences, which could occasionally be controversial. This interview was conducted from November 2019 to March 2020.

## Informant

The primary informants interviewed for this study comprised ten individuals listed in Table 2, including Chinese female political representatives, NGO activists, academics, and male politicians based in Peninsular Malaysia. The researchers selected Chinese female political representatives due to their active and direct involvement in politics, whether holding significant positions within political parties or serving as members of the House of Representatives or the State Legislative Assembly in Peninsular Malaysia. Consequently, they possess a profound understanding of the political landscape. Academics were chosen for their expertise in Chinese political culture and active engagement in research on this subject. Chinese female NGO activists were included because they advocate for women’s rights, including those of Chinese women. Additionally, these activists collaborate and interact directly with female politicians, political parties, and government entities to empower women across economic, political, and social dimensions. Thus, NGO activists can provide insights based on their experiences in evaluating the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 2: List of Informants and Organizations

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Politic party/Institution</b>
Informant A	Women’s Political Representation	MCA
Informant B	Women’s Political Representation	MCA
Informant C	Women’s Political Representation	PKR
Informant D	Women’s Political Representation	PKR
Informant E	Women’s Political Representation	DAP
Informant F	Women’s Political Representation	DAP
Informant G	Women’s Political Representation	DAP
Informant H	Male Politicians	PKR
Informant I	Researcher/Academician	University of Malaya
Informant J	Activist	(NGO)

Sources: Authors’ Illustration.

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The perspectives of a male informant were also included, as he voluntarily offered to be interviewed about the political culture of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. Male politicians are directly involved with Chinese female politicians, and their inclusion, NGO activists, and academics aim to balance perspectives through triangulation. Triangulation is a method used to strengthen the reliability of the data collected through the selected research methodology. The interviews with political informants lasted two hours, while other sessions averaged one and a half hours. The interviews ceased once data saturation was achieved, meaning no new information emerged. Data saturation is critical in determining sample size in qualitative research.

### How Do We Analyse the Data?

Statements from the interviews with informants were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis of these transcriptions involved examining the frequency and similarities of the views expressed by the informants, which were then categorized into themes. Narrative statements or storylines were also included, such as direct quotations illustrating the informants' experiences and feelings regarding the subject under study. Due to the verbatim nature of these quotations, there is occasional use of colloquial language or a mix of Malay and English. Informants were coded based on the number of individuals involved in the interview process. The direct quotations presented were coded with specific page and line references to facilitate easy referencing, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Code Processing

Informant 5:	<i>“When I focused most of my time on the NGO, I was not interested in politics” (P: 108, L: 3174-3175).</i>
Indicator:	
P:	<i>Page</i>
L:	<i>Line</i>

Sources: Authors' Illustration.

### Secondary Data

Significant emphasis was placed on collecting secondary data to gain information on the history and background and a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study. Several primary and secondary data sources were utilized, including materials obtained from libraries and archives. Additionally, publications from government agencies were consulted, such as those from the Malaysian Election Commission, the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Malaysian Parliament, and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. Moreover, materials from political parties and NGOs were also used. These secondary data sources were articles, reports, books, newspapers, and working papers.

### Findings and Discussion

We unpack the Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia who face challenges in the political arena, as indicated in Figure 2 below, including gender competitiveness, cronyism, political interest, political rivals, male dominance, time issues, racial sentiments, sexist statements, and political ideologies. The challenges that do not exist in isolation are interconnected and influence Chinese women in politics. These challenges need to be discussed when evaluating the political culture of Chinese women, as

these elements have harmed the political involvement of Chinese women.

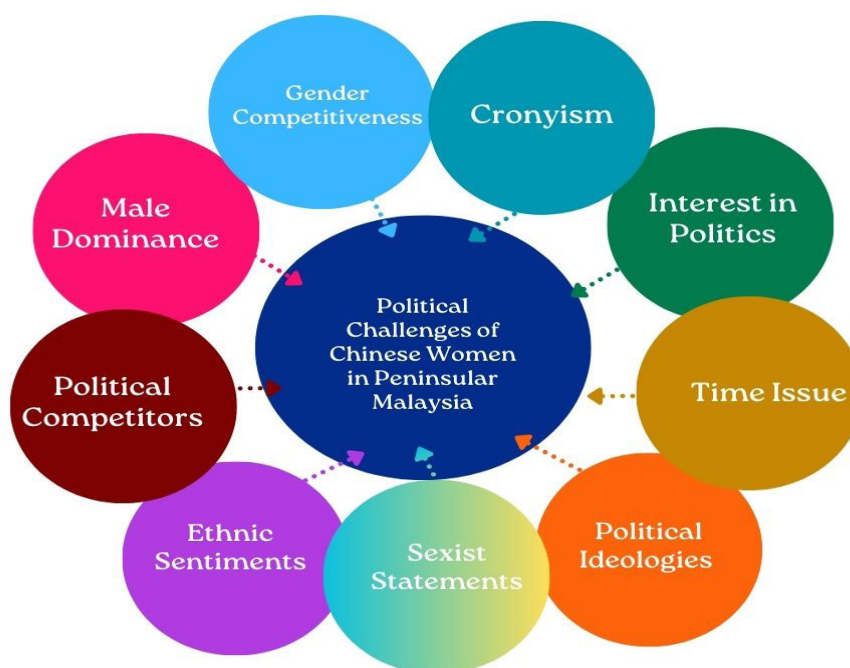


Figure 2: Political Challenges of Chinese Women in Peninsular Malaysia.  
Sources: Authors' Illustration.

### *Interest in Politics*

Most interviewees initially expressed little interest in becoming involved in politics. However, active participation in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a desire to help the community led them to engage in politics. Many interviewees shared their views, with statements such as the following being issued by the informants:

“When I focused most of my time on the NGO, I was not interested in politics.<sup>24</sup>”

Based on our conversations with most interviewees, they are not primarily motivated by interest in their political engagement. Some interviewees attribute the unpleasant and corrupt political environment to women’s disinterest in participating in politics. We interpret this lack of interest in politics as a sign of challenges, leading the informants to need higher political aspirations. Emphasizing interest is crucial because there is no drive for hard work and struggle to succeed in politics without it. Initially, the informants became involved in politics, aiming to achieve other objectives, such as obtaining funds to support the NGOs with which they are affiliated. Rebenstorf<sup>25</sup> argues:

“Political interest leads people to weigh ideological positions, assess their pros and cons, and commit to achieving political identity. Political identity stays diffuse with political interest: one needs to know what to think or believe or where one’s commitments are.”



## The Political Challenges Among Chinese Women in Peninsular Malaysia

Interest in politics encourages someone to consider a political ideology deeply when evaluating matters as good or bad. Political identity is assessed through strengths and weaknesses, assisting individuals in making commitments and successfully constructing their political identities. An interest in politics makes political identity apparent due to clarity in thinking about what goals to achieve. Without goals, there is no dedication and effort made to achieve them. Therefore, lacking interest will hinder a politician's journey in the political field.

### *Sexist Statements*

Sexist statements are among the challenges faced by Chinese female politicians. Demeaning remarks occur involving individuals from different parties. Here are some examples of expressions provided by the informants:

“...often experience bullying in Parliament and face numerous sexist remarks.<sup>26</sup>”

The use of sexist statements is prohibited in Parliament- can be seen through the Rules of Procedure of the House of Representatives Regulation 36(4), which constitutes an offense for house members to use rude language or make sexist remarks. Marital status, mainly being single or unmarried, also becomes a subject of support and excessive teasing by male Parliament members- this situation creates discomfort among female politicians. Statements that demean women and contain sexist remarks also affect Chinese female politicians as they can undermine their dignity and reduce their self-esteem. Male politicians often make these demeaning statements and sexist remarks from different parties. The phenomenon is not merely aimed at demeaning female politicians but also at attacking opposing parties.

### *Time Issue*

“The phrase ‘Time is gold’ is often reiterated to underscore the importance of time to individuals. Time management is one of the challenges faced by the informants, especially for those who are married. Involvement in politics demands high commitment and sacrifice as a career in the political sphere requires not only time during working hours from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. but also constant readiness, as the duties and responsibilities of a politician involve serving the community. Working hours do not confine the issues faced by the public, as stated below:”

“Without courage, one cannot undertake work that demands constant attention around the clock, even receiving calls in the middle of the night. For me, this is a life challenge. I understand that some people prefer a calm and relaxed life; some seek excitement, while others are willing to embrace challenges. I dare to accept these challenges.<sup>27</sup>”

Effective time management is crucial for female politicians to balance their political commitments with family responsibilities. Political duties often encroach upon weekend family time, as weekends are typically busy periods when constituents seek meetings with their representatives and attend political events. Therefore, female politicians must possess strong time management skills to allocate sufficient time for their husbands, children, and other family members, ensuring they receive the attention they need without feeling neglected.

Moreover, due to the unpredictable nature of political work, women must adeptly manage their time to fulfill their political obligations and household duties. For unmarried female politicians, time-related concerns are less pronounced, with safety being a more significant issue. The demanding nature of political work may require them to operate without fixed schedules, especially during emergencies such as natural disasters, where immediate action is necessary to provide aid and support to affected constituents.

### ***Gender Competitiveness***

According to most informants, gender competition is one of the political challenges faced due to the political structure dominated by male politicians. If the trust and space provided are limited, it is undoubtedly difficult for women to succeed in politics. Some statements issued by most informants regarding gender competition are as follows:

“There are always voices saying, “Oh, she can’t do it, she’s a woman.” Indeed, no society completely supports our struggle or everything we do.”<sup>28</sup>”

Women encounter challenges in political arenas due to perceived male superiority, which subjects them to heightened scrutiny and skepticism regarding their credibility. Consequently, women must exert additional effort to prove their competence and qualifications, especially when vying for significant positions within political parties or candidacy in elections. To address these challenges, proactive measures such as organizing community engagement activities and programs are essential for enhancing visibility and rapport with constituents. Female politicians often face scrutiny regarding their roles and responsibilities as mothers and wives, which are perceived as impediments to their active involvement in politics. This challenge is acknowledged by Azlina Othman, who notes that married female politicians are often unfairly labeled as neglectful mothers due to their political commitments.<sup>29</sup> Such perceptions stem from entrenched patriarchal cultural norms that assign distinct gender roles based on biological differences, perpetuating the belief in male superiority.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to familial responsibilities, Chinese female politicians encounter challenges related to gender competition, wherein societal expectations of women’s gentleness and maternal roles act as barriers to political engagement. Compared to their male counterparts, women often face heightened expectations and must exert more effort to prove their political acumen. This notion of hegemonic masculinity, prevalent within Malaysian political circles, further exacerbates the situation, as political parties tend to favor male candidates under the assumption that they are more electable.<sup>31</sup> In this context, female politicians, including those of Chinese descent, must navigate gendered challenges within a political landscape dominated by masculine norms, where their credibility and competence face constant scrutiny compared to male politicians.

### ***Male Dominance***

The patriarchal culture, deeply ingrained in Malaysian society across various ethnic communities, prioritizes men and their leadership roles. Cultural norms stem from societal perceptions shaped by perceived differences in physical and biological attributes between men and women. Men are often regarded as more robust and capable leaders than women. Consequently, the perception reinforces male dominance in various spheres, including politics. Within political parties, this patriarchal culture manifests as male dominance, with men holding key positions and exerting influence over decision-making processes. Male hegemony serves as a significant barrier, commonly referred to as a glass

ceiling, hindering women's advancement and meaningful participation in politics- prevailing male dominance within political parties poses substantial challenges for women seeking to engage in politics actively:

“In the current scenario, regardless of the party, the position of women is merely a token gesture from men.<sup>32</sup>”

Sharifah Syahirah and Ummu Atiyah<sup>33</sup> highlight that despite advocacy from women leaders for increased female representation in elections, political parties continue to nominate female candidates on a limited scale. Out of 2,333 candidates in the 14th General Election for seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (DUN), only 251 were women. The allocation of merely ten percent of candidacies to women in the 14th General Election is deemed insufficient, especially considering that women constitute more than half of Malaysia's total voters. Additionally, there are instances where political parties assign female candidates to challenging electoral constituencies, impacting their chances of securing seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (DUN).<sup>34</sup> The predominance of men within political parties presents a barrier for female candidates seeking to contest and compete in elections- this challenge is expected in any specific party; even the PAS party nominates female candidates in minimal numbers.<sup>35</sup>

According to informants, one solution to address the issue of male dominance in political parties is to encourage more women to contest at the grassroots level, such as at the branch and division levels. More female candidates will win if many women start contesting at the grassroots level. By having more women at the party's grassroots level, female politicians can negotiate with male politicians regarding women's political leadership at higher levels.

### *Ethnic Sentiments*

Ethnic sentiments also impact Chinese female politicians, often leading people to select leaders based not on the politicians' credibility but on the political parties perceived to safeguard the interests of their respective ethnic groups. In Malaysia, individuals prioritized protecting their interests and acting in favor of their ethnic groups' survival, even before the country gained independence- this is evident in forming political party coalitions like the Alliance Party before Malaya's independence from British rule. The Alliance Party was a coalition comprising UMNO representing the Malay community, MCA representing the Chinese community, and MIC representing the Indian community. The multi-ethnic society moved and fought to safeguard and protect the interests of their respective communities through ethnically based political parties, and this phenomenon has persisted until now. Politicians often utilize ethnic sentiments to garner public support, and this has become a vital issue frequently discussed by Malaysian society. Statements made by informants:

“In our country, many play on issues of race and religion in politics. Indeed, it is not just a barrier for women; it obstructs anyone who wants to work for Malaysians. Wishing to serve Malaysians, this indeed is disruptive.<sup>36</sup>”

Ethnic sentiments present a political challenge as each ethnic group perceives others as competitors. The failure of the system to cultivate a unified national identity and components such as the national language and national schools hinder identity strengthening and national identity formation, as well as the existence of using ethnic sentiments to discredit certain politicians to gain support from the community they represent. According to informants, ethnic sentiments are often

exploited in multi-ethnic societies- should not be invoked- and pose challenges not only to female politicians but to all politicians, regardless of gender and ethnicity, who genuinely serve and advocate for the interests of all Malaysians. Informants also recounted their political experiences, revealing instances where they were questioned by specific individuals due to their Chinese ethnicity, being deemed unsuitable to represent areas predominantly inhabited by Malay and Indian communities. Initially, this elicited feelings of despair and disillusionment.

The acceptance of politicians, including Chinese female politicians, extends beyond the Chinese community to encompass the diverse ethnicities in Malaysia. Chinese female politicians must garner support from the Chinese community and the broader Malaysian society, which comprises various ethnic groups. Malaysia's population is diverse and balanced with Malay, Bumiputera, and non-Malay ethnicities. As such, primordial factors like ethnicity, religion, language, and culture deeply influence the political landscape of Malaysian society. Unlike Western countries, where political parties often prioritize global issues such as human rights, social justice, and sustainability, Malaysian politics tends to be more influenced by these primordial elements.

According to Gerakan President Mah Siew Keong, race-based parties are still relevant in Malaysia, even though component parties within the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition could merge and abolish this system in the long run. Mah Siew Keong believes that the establishment of PPBM as a Malay opposition party by former UMNO president Mahathir Mohamad demonstrates that race-based parties are still relevant. Therefore, ethnic sentiments pose a challenge to politicians in Malaysia, including female politicians, as political leaders often use ethnic sentiments to garner voter support, exacerbated by the influence of mass media. The flow of inaccurate information and writings that can escalate racial tensions on social media can contribute to the worsening of interethnic relations in Malaysia.

### *Political Competitors*

A few informants also raise the issue of political rivals because political rivals are among the indicators affecting Chinese women in politics. Threats and intimidation from adversaries will pose challenges that will disrupt Chinese women's career advancement in politics. Therefore, engaging in politics requires not only physical preparedness but also mental preparedness. The statement below is among the statements issued by a small number of informants:

“Because, you see, in politics, sometimes you have enemies, you indeed have your enemies, and those enemies sometimes you do not even know them. Just because, you know, if you are good, even if you are perfect, it will still create enemies because, to them, you are a threat. So, in politics, it is hilarious; it is different from the outside. Outside, if we are good with people, we do good, we are diligent, and everyone appreciates us, right? Not in politics. Politics concerns power position: because these are limited, many chase after them. So, if you are good and excel yourself, you could be a threat to others, perceived as a threat, and that also creates enemies for no reason.<sup>37</sup>”

The informant asserts that the political arena invariably breeds adversaries. Sometimes, individuals encounter unfamiliar foes when they perceive a threat to their political standing. This political landscape, driven by power dynamics and limited opportunities, prompts intense competition for supremacy. Threats are often viewed as adversaries, leading to active efforts to discredit political

rivals.

The informant's statements highlight her victimization by political adversaries, who maliciously spread scandalous rumors about her online. These attacks aim to tarnish her political career. Politicians must exercise caution in their conduct and speech to thwart attempts by adversaries to undermine their political standing, particularly amidst the pervasive dissemination of information through social media. Slander and misinformation spread rapidly, providing fodder for hired "keyboard warriors" intent on discrediting politicians. In some cases, even family members of politicians become targets of such attacks. Political rivals are not only a challenge for female politicians but also faced by male politicians. According to statements made by former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, being labeled as an ultra-Malay is an action by political rivals to undermine him. His statements are as follows:

"I want to deny that I am ultra Malay. This is a label Kuan Yew imposed on me. This is common in politics: to discredit the enemy, we give our opponents a bad label."

Enemies pose a threat that can jeopardize and undermine politicians' careers. Individuals venturing into politics must prepare to face threats from political rivals. These rivals arise from differing political ideologies and behaviors, which can spark opinion shifts and incite anger. To succeed, politicians must skillfully and diplomatically handle these rivals to continue thriving in politics.

### *Cronyism*

Some informants raised cronyism as one of the challenges. Cronyism is a phenomenon that can hinder individuals with potential in politics, as it impedes their involvement in advancing their careers in the political arena. Below are some views expressed by a small number of informants:

"When I was first named as a candidate for the state legislative assembly seat, even members of our party openly challenged me and my staff, questioning why the party would nominate a woman. They said it should be a man because women are useless. However, if the candidate they support is a man and his opponent is a woman, they will try to tarnish her reputation and bring her down.<sup>38</sup>"

The informant highlights the prevalence of factionalism within the party, asserting that factional cohesion often surpasses party unity. Per the informant, this dynamic undermines internal unity and skews selections for the Party's Supreme Council and election candidates toward cronyism rather than meritocracy. The informant recounts personal experiences of facing opposition from male politicians after being chosen as a State Legislative Assembly candidate- unsuccessful candidates' dissatisfaction compounded the gender bias, fuelling this opposition. The phenomenon of cronyism results in party members supporting close associates over potentially more qualified candidates, impeding progress and tarnishing the party's reputation. Addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring that competent and deserving individuals lead election campaigns and the party hierarchy, thus fostering societal and national development.



### *Political Ideologies*

The informant highlighted those political ideologies, along with the perception of dirty politics and untrustworthiness, pose significant challenges that could deter Chinese women from actively participating in politics:

“We do not want to get involved in politics because to the Chinese, politics is very complicated, very complicated, and then we are one ethnicity that always behaves. Even in old-school teaching, Scottice says that never going to court is taboo and that going to court is no good. In China, politics is ranked at the bottom; the highest rank is the scholar. Scholars and professions like medicine, business, and politics ranked bottom. We have no regard for these people want you know we think on the golden Chinese no doubt to be a politician to be a minister or something like that it is perfect in the sense mighty you can make a lot of money but somehow in their hearts of heart these people they cannot be trusted. It cannot be trusted, so the Chinese want to refrain from participating in politics. This mindset has been passed on from generation to generation, which is why those said that even before our independence, you did not see many Chinese in the cabinet or the formation of the new government.<sup>39</sup>”

The informant stated that a political career is dirty and untrustworthy, leading to a lack of interest in the Chinese community’s political involvement. The arrest of several Chinese political leaders has contributed to the perception that politics is dirty. Parents involved in politics do not encourage their children to engage in the field. Furthermore, many consider courts taboo in Chinese society, as numerous politicians have faced charges and prosecution in court. Teresa Kok, among the female politicians, was detained under the ISA in 2008.

Furthermore, specific parties singled out detained politicians to undercut their influence. Some informants linked entrepreneurship with the limited involvement of the Chinese community in politics- this connection arises from the requirement of asserting political ideologies in politics, which may disrupt their business interests. Within the worldly context of Chinese society, financial gain takes precedence. As a result, individuals prioritize economic pursuits over political ideologies to strengthen their monetary positions.

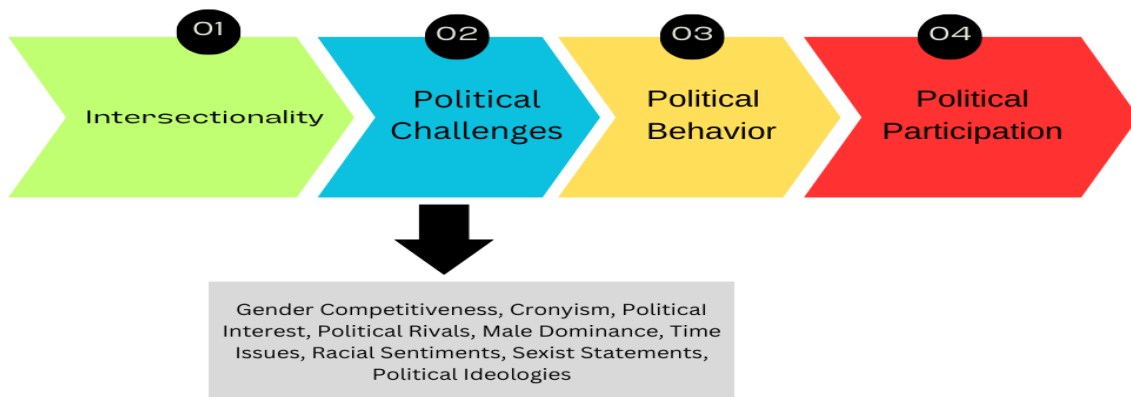


Figure 3: Political Challenges and Implications for the Political Participation of Chinese Women in Peninsular Malaysia.

Sources: Authors’ Illustration.

Figure 3 shows that through the political challenges of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia, they intersect and are linked, as highlighted by intersectionality theory. This political challenge then impacts the political behavior of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia, translated through the political participation of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia.

Individual political behavior is not only limited to action but also includes action orientation (identification, demands, expectations, evaluation). Political behavior can be described and explained through the actions of groups, organizations, communities, elites, or through social movements. Political behavior involves fundamental questions about the community's political ability, including their level of knowledge, understanding, and interest in matters related to politics.<sup>40</sup> Individual political behavior includes voting and politics, which are associated with citizens' political actions and political issues.<sup>41</sup> Studies on political behavior in elections have dominated studies based on political behavior.<sup>42</sup> Political behavior is a person's actions towards political activities, including perception or views and participation in political activities.<sup>43</sup> This action has led to voters' choice or support for candidates or political parties in elections. Individual political behavior will then form group political behavior, translated through political involvement, including the political participation of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia.

Political participation can broadly be described as citizens' actions to influence politics. Since Pericles' renowned funeral speech in 431 BCE, politicians and scholars have highlighted the distinctive nature of democracy by underscoring the role of regular citizens in political life. Today, the range of participatory actions seems limitless, encompassing activities like voting, demonstrating, contacting officials, boycotting, attending party events, guerrilla gardening, blogging, volunteering, joining flash mobs, signing petitions, purchasing fair-trade goods, and even acts of protest through self-sacrifice. While political participation is relevant to any political system, it is an essential element of democracy. As Verba and Nie<sup>44</sup> put it, "Where few take part in decisions, there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is." Thus, the breadth and depth of political participation serve as significant, if not crucial, indicators of democratic quality. Political participation can be categorized into two types: direct and indirect. Indirect participation involves members of society engaging in democratic activities such as voting, staying informed about politics, and understanding political theory.

In contrast, direct participation occurs when individuals and groups hold positions within a political party, become active members, and participate in political activities on a full-time basis. The political involvement of Chinese women in Malaysia is still low, one of which is based on the participation of Chinese women in the House of Representatives and the State Legislative Assemblies. Therefore, various efforts need to be made to improve the participation of Chinese women in politics.<sup>45</sup>

We untangle that the political challenges of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia consist of gender competitiveness, cronyism, political interest, political rivals, male dominance, time issues, racial sentiments, sexist statements, and political ideologies. Political challenges faced by married Malay women politicians include being labeled as bad mothers because they are considered to neglect the family. Nevertheless, unmarried female politicians are often targeted with sexist statements, perceptions of the bad about politics, factional practices, and the speed of information technology that facilitates the spread of fake news. These challenges are not much different from the political challenges Chinese women face through this writing. The findings of this study show that political challenges facing Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia consist of gender competitiveness, cronyism, political interest, political rivals, male dominance, time issues, racial sentiments, sexist statements, and political ideologies.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

We have successfully addressed the study's central question, which is to examine the political challenges faced by Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia and their implications for the involvement of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysian politics. We opened a conversation about how Chinese women politicians have to confront what is known as current political maneuvering. Ultimately, we identified gender, cronyism, political interest, political rivals, male domination, timing issues, racial sentiments, sexist statements, and political ideology as contributors to these challenges. We argue that the challenges do not stand alone but are interconnected, as emphasized through intersectionality theory. We considered challenge indicators because these elements have harmed the involvement of Chinese women in politics.

In the political sphere, assigning unfavorable labels to an adversary can be a powerful tool to influence public perception. These labels often exaggerate, misrepresent, or stigmatize specific characteristics, pushing people to form negative associations with the targeted group. This tactic is common in politics and is particularly relevant to minority groups, as it reflects the struggles of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia. "To Denigrate an Adversary, We Assign Unfavourable Labels to Them," this is what social and political challenges that Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia face, specifically through the lens of how adversaries use negative labeling as a tactic to undermine or marginalize them.

The involvement of Chinese women in the political arena in Malaysia needs to be higher, as can be seen in the number of women in Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies. Moreover, the quota system of 30 percent of women in the highest council by the DAP and MCA parties has yet to reach the set quota target. Therefore, this study needs to examine the indicators that cause this phenomenon to occur. Furthermore, more research on Chinese women is required to enhance efforts to empower them in the political, social, and economic fields.

Malaysia practices a democracy-based governance system that upholds human rights principles, as evident in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Part II, Article 8, which addresses the right to equality within the Malaysian context. Any form of discrimination against citizens based on religion, race, descent, place of birth, or gender is a practice opposed by the government. However, citizens' privileges differ as enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia through Article 153.<sup>47</sup> The advantages the Bumiputera community enjoys stem from their status as indigenous inhabitants throughout Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. Thus, the practice of equality in the Malaysian context is also different, where communities other than the Bumiputera cannot enjoy the privileges of the Bumiputera community. Therefore, if there is discrimination based on gender and ethnicity, including in politics, all parties need to take action to address and resolve the issue- essential to safeguard everyone's interests within Malaysia's democratic framework.

We suggest that future research on the political study of Chinese women in Peninsular Malaysia needs to consider the views of Chinese women from the states of Sabah and Sarawak because other indicators may influence the involvement of Chinese women in politics. Future studies can also consider the views of the government, both the state and central governments, on the political involvement of Chinese women- they can carry out women's empowerment activities, including Chinese women. Challenges in the context of the government also need to be seen and improved in efforts to empower Chinese women in politics. We assert that future studies could also combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Additionally, future researchers should expand the sample size in the following studies to include women from other ethnicities besides the Chinese ethnicity, including indigenous women from Sabah and Sarawak who comprise various ethnicities such as Kadazan, Iban, and others.

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