

# Chapter 10

## (De)legitimation Strategies in the Media Statements of Women's Rights Organisations



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**Abstract** This chapter examines the (de)legitimation strategies that women's movement organisations in Malaysia use to advance their policy and issue demands. Sustained pressure from activists has been important to get the state to implement reforms to improve women's rights in this country. One of the frequent means by which they delegitimise the decisions and practices of the state and claim legitimacy for their own change agendas is through media statements which are widely published and reported in the mainstream press. This case study explores the strategies employed in English language media statements released by the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, the Women's Aid Organisation, and the All Women's Action Society. More specifically, it focuses on statements pertaining to one of the key areas that the groups advocate, namely women's right to safe, healthy, and gainful employment. Using frameworks on discursive (de)legitimation and social actor representation, this chapter examines the various ways the organisations frame and assess legislation, policies, and political actions that impact the experiences and livelihood of working women. It distinguishes and analyses four main (de)legitimation strategies used in the press statements, which are (de)legitimation through authorisation, rationalisation, discourses of nation-building and discourses of women as victims. The chapter argues that these devices may be effective in shaping public opinion and gender governance outcomes if they are perceived as representing or promoting national interests but potentially constrained by culturally dominant discourses that marginalise feminist ways of thinking.

**Keywords** Legitimation strategies • Social actor representation • Gender • Women's rights organisations • Media statements

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K. Rajandran and C. Lee (eds.), *Discursive Approaches to Politics in Malaysia*, Asia in Transition 18, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5334-7\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5334-7_10)

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## 10.1 Introduction

Sustained pressure from feminist activists is often important to get governments to undertake reforms that advance gender equality. In Malaysia, much of the structural and substantive improvements in women's rights have been brought about through the efforts of women's organisations pushing their agenda on the state (Tan, 2011). These successes have been partly dependent on the discursive politics of the organisations as they disrupt state logics and dominant worldviews by 'challenging established definitions, categories, and conceptions; demonstrating the shortcomings of the received view; showing that alternative understandings are possible; and mobilising support for significant changes in accepted meanings or "discursive regimes"' (Hawkesworth, 2012, p. 120). Thus, to better understand the process of gender governance in this country, it is essential to study the political argumentation of these women's rights organisations. However, whilst scholarship has explored these groups' collective actions and struggle for gender justice, to my knowledge, no work has been done to examine their language practices. This chapter presents an initial step towards filling this research gap by analysing the discursive strategies that women's movement organisations in Malaysia use to delegitimise government approaches to gender-related issues and legitimise their own policy and legislative goals.

One of the frequent means by which women's NGOs in Malaysia assess and repudiate the decisions and governance principles of the state is through press releases. These statements, in contrast to the groups' other publications, have a larger readership as they are widely circulated and reported in the media. They have become important sites where activists contest gendered systems of power and dominant ideologies with the intention of persuading the public and policymakers. This chapter closely examines the organisations' English language press statements using van Leeuwen's (2008) taxonomy of social actor representation and a set of categories of (de)legitimation proposed by van Leeuwen (2008), Ross and Rivers (2017) and Atanga (2009). Through this, the study aims to identify the strategies that the activists use to construct the worthiness of laws, policies and political actions.

This chapter begins with an overview of the Malaysian women's movement and its achievements and struggles for legislative reform. It continues by briefly exploring the legitimisation practices of women's rights groups in other countries. It then outlines the data and analytical approaches used in this study, before presenting the findings from the analysis. This section illustrates the most common means of (de)legitimation in the media statements through a detailed examination of representative extracts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of these strategies' theoretical ability to create resonance with target audiences and improve gender governance outcomes.

## 10.2 Women's Rights Groups and Legislative Reform

The Malaysian women's movement is not homogenous, speaking with one voice, but comprises of a profusion of organisations across the political spectrum. These groups have coalesced into two main coalitions: the National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO) and the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG). NCWO, an umbrella organisation for over 200 affiliates, is closely associated with the state and, in the past, with the Barisan Nasional (BN) administration. Although it describes itself as a non-political body, its members include women's wings of political parties, and its leadership and that of Wanita UMNO have historically overlapped on occasion. Leveraging on its long-standing relationship with the establishment, NCWO would lobby directly with the BN government and give impetus to women's rights legislation and policies through 'behind-the-scenes negotiation' (Ng et al., 2006, p. 21). Amongst its achievements in moving BN towards a more gender-responsive governance are legislative reforms such as job security and pensionable status for women in the civil service, separate taxation for women, and illegalising polygamy and raising the minimum marriage age to eighteen for non-Muslims (NCWO, 2017). However, scholars have pointed out that its strategy to work for change from within and maintain a non-confrontational approach limited its activism to issues that were not politically threatening to the authoritarian state (Lai, 2002; Ng et al., 2006). As yet, there is no strong evidence that NCWO will withdraw from its accommodative stance and engage in a more contestatory dialogue with the current BN-Perikatan Nasional (PN) administration.

JAG is an informal collective with fluid membership. Unlike NCWO, it does not have links with the government or political parties. Thus, its discourse plays a vital role in gaining legitimacy for feminist perspectives and gender equality laws, as illustrated below. The coalition was launched in 1984 as the Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women (JAG-VAW) which consisted of individuals and five women's organisations that were aligned over the issue of VAW. It initially focussed on reforming legislation pertaining to rape. After four years of lobbying lawmakers and mobilising public opinion through the media, amendments were passed in 1989. JAG also pushed for the enactment of a Domestic Violence Act (DVA). Member groups lobbied MPs from both sides in Parliament. At the same time, they organised an array of activities to increase public backing and education around this issue (Lai, 2002). Following almost ten years of agitation, the DVA was finally passed by Parliament in 1994. Support from the BN-led administration had been a problem. Although the bill was sponsored by then Minister of National Unity and Social Development Napsiah Omar, it received strong opposition from UMNO members during its tabling, up to the final night of the parliamentary session (Abdul Aziz, 2005). It would take another two years before the legislation was implemented after activists handed a memorandum to the Minister in Charge of Women's Affairs and then took to the street on International Women's Day 1996 (Lai, 2002).

Whilst the rape law reform and DVA are important markers of progress, both fell short of what JAG had sought. Lai (2002, pp. 63–64) argues that this 'reflected the

more secure base of the state in comparison to that of the women's movement' and 'indicates the need for the women's movement to grow and develop a wider base so that the state will have no choice but to concede to the movement's demands'. Tan (2011, p. 95) similarly underscores the importance of public support in shifting the course of gender governance, observing that:

Often ... women's demands were acceded to in pursuit of popular support rather than out of a commitment to women's rights. The passage of the reform bill for laws related to rape, for instance, is seen not as a sincere move by the government to create safe spaces for women or to adopt the recommendations of the feminist lobby but as a response to the groundswell of public opinion.

These arguments point to the importance for activists to use discursive practices that persuade the *rakyat* to see issues according to their perspective and, in the process, increase public pressure on legislators to introduce progressive gender laws. In order to gain insights into the strategies that the NGOs employ, the present study examines their media statements pertaining to one of the key areas where the legitimacy of state actions and decisions is frequently called into question by the activists, namely women's right to safe, healthy, and gainful employment. JAG members are central players in ongoing legislative and social debates on the welfare of women workers. Together with the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government, they drafted a Gender Equality Act which is expected to protect women from discrimination in the workplace. After the change to the PN government in March 2020, it has been unclear when the act will be tabled in Parliament, and JAG continues to advocate for the passage of the bill. The coalition has also been vocally critical of the way in which sexual harassment in the workplace has been approached. JAG members had been calling for a Sexual Harassment Act since the early 1990s and even submitted a proposed bill to the BN government in 2001, but no stand-alone law on sexual harassment was enacted by this administration. In January 2020, the PH Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development announced that it would table the Sexual Harassment Bill in March 2020, but this did not materialise due to the change in federal government. Consequently, in October 2020, the All Women's Action Society (AWAM), which is part of JAG, ran a social media campaign to build advocacy for the bill and push for it to be tabled in November 2020. The bill was eventually tabled for its first reading in December 2021 and passed in the Dewan Rakyat on 20 July 2022. JAG has publicly committed to ensuring the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act is effectively implemented. Another member organisation, Tenaganita spearheads programmes to protect the rights of migrant and domestic workers in Malaysia, whilst Empower is actively involved in promoting women's political and economic empowerment. Hence, JAG's press statements on gender and work issues provide a rich resource for analysing the (de)legitimation of gender governance in Malaysia.

### 10.3 Legitimation Strategies of Women's Movement Actors Beyond Malaysia

Much of the current scholarship on the legitimization practices of women's interest groups has emerged from political science, sociology, and anthropology. These studies have explored the discourses that women's activists produce to legitimate positive action for women and mobilise support from the state and wider society. Whittier (2016), for example, argues that women's movement organisations in the US were able to secure the votes of both liberal and conservative members of Congress for the Violence Against Women Act by strategically combining feminism with discourses of crime to construct a gendered crime frame that was compatible with multiple ideological positions. Brommer (2011) discusses how two South Asian domestic abuse organisations in Northern California, which initially faced community hostility, built widespread support by mobilising discourses of differing experience, empowerment, and social change. Jenson et al. (2019, p. 137) describe how feminist activists in the European Union mobilised 'a discourse of equal opportunities in order to claim that real gender equality required some special opportunities for women'. Whilst the articulation of certain discourses can open new pathways to action, the assemblage of *effective* discourses evolves over time. As Naples (2013, p. 136) demonstrates, discursive frames can lose their power for social activism through delegitimation and co-optation by conservative political groups and media. When this happens, feminist activists must 'create alternative discursive strategies to effect cultural and political change'.

Research shows that women's groups often draw on nationalist discourses to legitimise their demands. The Indonesian women's movement in the 1950s, for instance, adapted a discourse of nationalism to argue for women's education rights. Education was framed as necessary to prepare women for their roles as wives and mothers, which would benefit the country since a strong family was regarded as the foundation of a strong, stable, and successful nation. Education was also justified as a means of shaping women into useful citizens who can contribute to the country's development through their productive labour (Martyn, 2005). In Korea, the family-law reform movement advocated for the abolition of the family-head system by engaging in the postcolonial nationalist discourse of (re)constructing culture. Feminist groups contended that the family-head system had been brought in by their former Japanese colonisers, and it distorted traditional Korean family customs which were neither patriarchal nor patrilineal. Similarly, the 'comfort women' redress movement employs nationalist elements in their discourse to win more attention and support for their demands (Kim, 2009).

Although nationalist discourses have positively served these feminist causes, they can be problematic. In the case of the Indonesian women's movement, the expansion of women's education rights through their nationalistic gender roles underscores what many feminist writers have argued: that whilst nationalism permits women to forge a place in the public sphere, it also shores up traditional female roles of motherhood. For the Indonesian activists, 'these roles enabled women's progress to

be demanded for the good and benefit of the nation but meant that when women's interests were not grounded in nationalist discourse or agendas it was difficult to mobilise wider support' (Martyn, 2005, p. 209). This could be clearly seen in the activists' struggle for marriage equality, which was a more contentious issue than education. Scholars have also critiqued the nationalist discourse that underlies the claim for redress for the wartime 'comfort women' in Korea, arguing that it neglects the fundamental issue of the 'comfort women' as sexual victims. The discourse, as represented by the comfort-women movement, reflects and reinforces the gender order, patriarchal norms of female sexuality (Kim, 2009) as well as a patriarchal paradigm of nationalism which interprets rape as 'the infringement of male property rights' and 'the violation of the nation' (Ueno, 2004, p. 94).

Researchers have examined how movement actors constitute subjectivities that serve as legitimisation devices. Zanker (2018), for example, found that during Liberia's civil war, women's groups described themselves as mothers and daughters in order to gain access to government officials and rebels and exert influence in negotiations. Richardson and Langford's (2015) analysis of press statements issued by Canada's childcare movement actors, who are overwhelmingly women, reveal that they discursively constructed their collective identity differently during two contrasting political climates. When there was a very real possibility of policy success for the organisation, their collective identity was more accommodating and sympathetic with the state. However, as the socio-political environment became more conservative and less friendly to their goals, they communicated a stronger sense of solidarity with labour groups, women's organisations, and social justice and anti-poverty groups. This could be seen as 'a strategy to increase the legitimacy of the group, as it suggests a greater mass of people concerned about [its core] issues' (ibid., p. 91).

As we shall see in this study, there are parallels between the practices discussed above and the instruments that Malaysian women's organisations employ in their pursuit of legitimisation. However, before we examine the recurrent (de)legitimation strategies in the media statements, the following section will describe the study's data and analytical frameworks.

## 10.4 Data and Approaches

This case study analyses English language media statements that were released by JAG, the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) and AWAM in 2020. At the time of writing, WAO and AWAM are both members of the JAG coalition. Focussing on these three civil society actors does not imply that they use the most effective (de)legitimation strategies or that they have the strongest influence on government policies. They were selected as they regularly issue media statements to push for improved governance in the context of gender and employment. They are not representative of all women's NGOs in the country. Rather, they provide illustrative examples of the ways women's interest groups in Malaysia frame and assess laws, policies and political actions that impact the lives of a broad range of working women, from

migrant workers to white-collar professionals to members of Parliament. JAG's statements were first located through an internet search using the key term 'Joint Action Group for Gender Equality', and then downloaded from online newspapers and NGO websites. WAO and AWAM's media statements were extracted from the 'Press Statements' and 'News' archives in their respective websites. Only original press releases were collected. News reports about these media statements as well as statements unrelated to gender and paid work were discarded. The final data set comprised 33 press releases: 9 by JAG, 19 by WAO and 5 by AWAM.

The statements were subjected to a coding analysis using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework of legitimization, as also attempted by Rajandran (Chapter "Voices of Economic Competence: Legitimizing the Government in Federal Budget Speeches"), Perumal, Govaichelvan, Sinayah, Ramalingam & Maruthai (Chapter "(De)legitimizing the 2021 Budget Allocation for Tamil Schools in a Talk Show") and Lee (Chapter "#KitaJagaKita: (De)legitimising the Government during the 2020 Movement Control Order"). The analysis is also complemented by Ross and Rivers' (2017) model for examining acts of delegitimation and Atanga's (2009) work on the legitimization of positive action for women. van Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes four main categories of legitimization:

*Authorisation.* Reference to authority figures, custom or law.

*Moral evaluation.* Reference to value systems

*Rationalisation.* Reference to the utility or purpose of particular actions and to social knowledges that give them cognitive validity

*Mythopoesis.* Reference to narratives that reward legitimate actions

Ross and Rivers (2017) consider van Leeuwen's categories from an inversed 'negative' position and propose four delegitimation strategies:

*Authorisation.* Reference to the abuse of authority

*Moral evaluation.* Reference to the violation of moral laws or standards

*Rationalisation.* Reference to the ineffectiveness and irrationality of actions

*Mythopoesis.* Reference to a negative imagined future scenario as a result of non-legitimate actions and policies

Atanga (2009) builds on van Leeuwen's framework to identify a set of argumentation strategies used in parliamentary discourse to legitimate positive action for women. In addition to authorisation and moral evaluation described earlier, she also observes the tactical articulation of discourses, such as those that position women as victims of violence and inequality. Through the coding process, the extent to which these various strategies are present in the data is established.

The construal of social actors plays an important role in justifying or reducing the legitimacy of political decisions. Thus, the analysis also employs van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic inventory of social actor representation to examine how social actors are realised through the roles they are given to play and through mechanisms such as association, assimilation and genericisation. These representational choices are correlated with specific means of (de)legitimation.

## 10.5 Discursive Strategies of (De)legitimation

Analytically, four main discursive (de)legitimation strategies are observed, which are (de)legitimation through authorisation, rationalisation, discourses of nation-building and discourses that position women as victims. Each of these strategies are used in combination with the others. Whilst there is also evidence of moral evaluation and mythopoesis, those are not as salient in the data. This section illustrates how the major strategies are linguistically constructed through a detailed analysis of extracts.

### 10.5.1 (De)Legitimisation Through Authorisation

Policies and reforms demanded by the women's rights groups are frequently constructed as beneficial and necessary through references to expert authority, impersonal authority, and the authority of conformity (van Leeuwen, 2008). With expert authority, legitimacy is established by citing well-known bodies whose expertise is often taken for granted in political discourse, as exemplified below:

#### **Extract 1:**

To address the economic impacts of COVID-19 on women, the UN recommends that governments take several tailored measures. These include putting cash directly in women's hands, introducing tax relief for women-owned businesses, and introducing a gender assessment as part of planned country assessments specifically to understand the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls and how to effectively address this.

*(‘United Nations Paper Warns of Gender Gaps Amplified by the COVID-19 Pandemic, Malaysia Must Take Heed’, WAO)*

This excerpt is from a press release urging the PN government to take gender-sensitive measures to address the impact of the pandemic on women. In the extract and the statement's title, expert authority takes the form of verbal process clauses (*the UN recommends, United Nations Paper Warns*) with the United Nations (UN) and its policy brief as subjects. The extract has the illocutionary force of a directive or advice; however, no arguments are presented to substantiate that the measures listed would be efficacious courses of action in Malaysia beyond 'the UN advocates them'. Similarly, the obligational modality (*must*) in the title rests, in part, on the UN's assumed superior knowledge. This illustrates how the activists use an organisation's standing as experts to increase legitimacy for their demands.

The NGOs also appeal to the impersonal authority of laws and international agreements such as the Constitution and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Extract 2 below comes from one of



the media statements pushing for amendments to the Employment Act to introduce, amongst others, anti-discrimination provisions. In this extract, the answer to the unspoken question ‘Why should we amend the Act?’ is ‘because the Constitution says so’. The second sentence implies that the Employment Act in its current form violates the Federal Constitution, the highest law of the land. Calling attention to this legal inconsistency legitimates the need for legislative revisions.

### **Extract 2:**

We also urge the government to include anti-discrimination protection for both employees and job seekers—on the grounds of gender, race, religion, disability, and other characteristics. This would help make a reality the protections against discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and religion in the Federal Constitution [...]

*(‘WAO welcomes government’s commitment to amend Employment Act, and repeats call for seven days paternity leave and job-seeker protection’, WAO)*

Another way that the women’s groups legitimise their causes is by suggesting that they have the endorsement of the Malaysian people. This is a type of conformity legitimation which conveys the implicit message that ‘if most people advocate this, so should you’. In the data, conformity legitimation is often realised linguistically via the inclusion of high-frequency modality as well as real numbers, as illustrated in Extract 3:

### **Extract 3:**

AWAM, together with the Malaysian public, is strongly advocating the Malaysian Parliament and the Cabinet of Malaysia to take serious action to put a stop to sexual harassment in the country through our AWAM for the Bill campaign [...] As part of this campaign AWAM has started a petition to push for the tabling of the Bill, and in the span of just three days, we have obtained over 3000 signatures.

*(‘AWAM’s fight to table the Sexual Harassment Bill at Parliament this November’, AWAM)*

In the excerpt above, AWAM legitimates their call for a Sexual Harassment Act by presenting the number of signatures collected in their recently launched petition and emphasising their strong public backing through the time indicator *in the span of just three days*. They also establish conformity legitimation by explicitly ‘associating’ (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 38) themselves *with the Malaysian public* to form an entity with shared interests and demands. The use of the mass noun suggests that they have the overwhelming support of Malaysians. All this can be viewed as a strategy

not only to encourage more civic engagement in their campaign, but also to place pressure on the PN government to respond to critical popular opinion.

The strategy of authorisation is also used to delegitimise state practices and decisions, such as by pointing out that they go against expert recommendations. In Extract 4 below, legal experts (*organisations including SUHAKAM, unions, and representatives of the Bar Council, Former Malaysian Bar President*) are the subjects of verbal process clauses. Their utterances carry recommendations that challenge the Malaysian government's assertion that there are *legal barriers to including job seekers in the Employment Act*. This can result in a loss of legitimacy for the state's decision-making.

**Extract 4:**

The Malaysian government had cited legal barriers to including job seekers in the Employment Act. However, organisations including SUHAKAM, unions, and representatives of the Bar Council, have noted that there are no legal or technical barriers to including job seekers in the Employment Act. Former Malaysian Bar President (Ragunath Kesavan) stated, “including protection for job seekers against discrimination in the Employment Act is not only reasonable but it must be legislated.”

(*'Anti-Discrimination Provisions in Employment Act Must Extend to Job Seekers and Include Disability Status'*, WAO)

Efforts to delegitimize the governance principles of the state also include suggesting a misuse or unethical use of power. Excerpt 5 is from a press statement criticising the police's decision to arrest five hospital cleaners and unionists for picketing during the COVID-19 conditional movement control order. Members of the national union for hospital cleaners had protested against their government-linked employer, Edgenta UEMS, for exploiting and intimidating its workers. Here, describing the actions of the police as *the high-handed behavior of a repressive state* delegitimises not just the excessive use of state power by the police, but also the PN government behind the police action on the basis that they are exercising authoritative rule.

**Extract 5:**

The arrest of five picketers epitomised the high-handed behavior of a repressive state, and we condemned this action especially when the overcrowded conditions of the lock-up where they spent the night did not comply with any Covid-19 preventive measures.

(*'Stop intimidation of victimised frontline hospital workers'*, JAG)

### 10.5.2 (De)Legitimisation Through Rationalisation

The women's groups frequently legitimate particular legislative bills through effect-oriented instrumental rationality, that is, they validate the need for a new or amended law by emphasising its positive effects, as illustrated below:

#### Extract 6:

The Sexual Harassment Bill and the proposed Anti-Stalking amendment to the Penal Code would go a long way in giving survivors security and most importantly, to demand accountability through a legal process where their personal, physical, mental and emotional security has been threatened or compromised. It would also serve as a prevention tool and teach Malaysians to have respect for their fellow citizens in all spaces, online or otherwise.

(*'Online Sexual Harassment on the Rise During MCO'*, AWAM)

Extract 6 stresses the predicted benefits of the *Sexual Harassment Bill* and *Anti-Stalking amendment to the Penal Code*, which legitimises them as purposeful, useful and effective. Within van Leeuwen's (2008) legitimisation framework, although morality is submerged in cases of instrumental rationalisation, there must be an element of moralisation for a practice to be justifiable. In the extract above, *give survivors security, demand accountability, serve as a prevention tool and teach Malaysians to have respect for their fellow citizens* are all moralised outcomes.

The activists also use instrumental rationalisation as a delegitimisation strategy. When taking this approach, the legitimacy of the PN government's plans and measures is undermined by casting them as ineffectual, for example in Extract 7:

#### Extract 7:

Despite eldercare being an important component of unpaid care work undertaken mostly by women, the Penjana stimulus package completely ignores eldercare services and focuses solely on childcare.

(*'Malaysia is witnessing a spike in people leaving the labour force due to unpaid care obligations'*, WAO)

PENJANA, Malaysia's fourth economic stimulus package, was introduced in June 2020 to protect jobs and help businesses recover from COVID-19. WAO calls out the absence of support for eldercare in the plan. The significance of this form of caregiving is underscored by explicitly describing it as *important* in the sentence-initial subordinate clause. However, in the subsequent main clause, this vital care work becomes the Phenomenon of the mental process *ignores*. This could generate

concerns about the value of PENJANA for women caregivers who wish to remain in the workforce, which can reduce its legitimacy.

The analysis shows that delegitimisation also occurs through theoretical rationalisation. According to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 116), theoretical legitimisation is ‘founded on some kind of truth, on “the way things are”’. Ross and Rivers (2017, p. 8) interpret this, in their delegitimisation framework, to mean that ‘an absence of legitimacy results from a lack of “truth” or reality which in turn makes it difficult to rationalise support of [particular social actors or practices]’. In several media statements, the NGOs indirectly encourage the reader to question whether certain state decisions are grounded in any kind of truth or logic, as in Extract 8:

**Extract 8:**

Meanwhile, the move to terminate Dr Narimah as chairperson of LPPKN by Perikatan Nasional is bizarre and baffling at the same time considering that her experience in the medical field is extensive.

This is compared to her replacement, Parit MP and Parit Umno leader Mohd Nizar Zakaria [...] who has no medical background nor any experience or expertise in the field of family planning, and/or women’s reproductive health.

(‘*Stop replacing qualified women with male politicians to head GLCs*’, JAG)

The extract above is from a media statement criticising the removal of women from leadership positions in government-linked companies and other organisations following PN’s coming into power in March 2020. It casts doubt on the logic of replacing Dr. Narimah as chair of the National Population and Family Development Board. A strong sense of irrationality is conveyed, first, by describing the move as *bizarre* and *baffling* and then, by juxtaposing her *extensive experience in the medical field* with her replacement’s lack of *medical background, experience* or *expertise in the field*. Highlighting such absences of reason in government actions serves to delegitimise the decisions. It is also notable that in the statement’s title, women like Dr. Narimah are classified as *qualified*, which encourages the reader to view them as legitimate leaders, whereas the men chosen to supersede them are merely *male politicians*. Nevertheless, since this press release was downloaded from *Malaysiakini*, it is uncertain whether the title was composed by the online news portal or the activists themselves.

### 10.5.3 Discourses of Nation-Building

The women’s groups often articulate nation-building discourses as a means to politically legitimise their interventions in gender governance. These discourses establish women’s rights and equality as a cornerstone of the country’s development

process. They also reimagine Malaysians as unified in their goal of producing a more gender-equal society, as shown below:

**Extract 9:**

The slated reforms above were the fruit of years of activism. But these reforms now hang in the balance. We must ensure that they are not derailed—if we are to create a Malaysia where women can thrive and flourish.

*(‘5 Reforms to Improve Women’s Rights that Must Persist’, WAO)*

The press release from which Extract 9 is taken calls for the introduction of the Sexual Harassment Act, anti-stalking laws, paternity leave, protections against workplace discrimination, and the Gender Equality Act. The statement is addressed to citizens rather than the state, as signalled by the collective pronoun *we* and personal address *you* throughout the text. In this excerpt, the use of ‘are to-infinitive’ in the if-clause implies that *creating a Malaysia where women can thrive and flourish* is a target that Malaysians—interpellated by *we*—are trying to achieve. The assumption that women’s empowerment is a desired outcome of nation-building is thus built into the text, which grants legitimacy to the legislative reforms above.

Through nation-building discourses, the activists construct a collective Malaysian identity that shares the values of gender equality. This is realised linguistically through ‘collectivisation’ (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 38). The people of Malaysia are collectivised through the pronoun *we*, as seen in Extract 9, as well as through other terms exemplified in Extract 10:

**Extract 10:**

We are all one in our goal that we would like to see a safe, thriving and nurturing Malaysia and not one that is archaic in its vision. This would be an excellent opportunity for the new PM and his team to prove to the rakyat that they will be indeed a cabinet that delivers.

*(‘Let’s Continue Our Agenda of Reform and Progress, Especially with Women’s Rights’, AWAM)*

AWAM instantiates a collective Malaysian voice through the first-person plural (*we, our, us*) and *rakyat*. This signals consonance amongst Malaysians, as does representing them as *all one* through a relational process. The noun phrases *Our Agenda* and *our goal* presuppose the existence of a shared desire for gender *reform* and a country that is *safe, thriving and nurturing* for women. By presenting the promotion of women’s rights as a universal cause uniting Malaysians, the activists give legitimacy to their demands. Similarly, Extract 11 carries the presupposition that making Malaysia more gender-equal is an accepted and understood aspiration.

**Extract 11:**

Now is the time for big and bold action towards making Malaysia a better country for women, and thus towards creating a better Malaysia for everyone.

(*'National Women's Day 2020: Four Things the Government Should Do to Make Malaysia a Better Country for Women'*, WAO)

The presupposition is cued in *towards making Malaysia a better country for women* and *to Make Malaysia a Better Country for Women*. Importantly, the interests of women are conflated with the interests of the wider society at the end of the excerpt. This is yet another way discourses of nation-building are used to legitimise approaches to gender equality. In several press statements, national interests are constructed as a basis for demanding women's rights. For instance, enhancing women's empowerment is represented as key to the country's economic development. In Extract 12 below, the expressions *which will, in turn, affect* and *directly translates into* explicitly indicate a direct cause-effect relationship between women's professional advancement and Malaysia's economic recovery and success. This constitutes a form of instrumental rationalisation, in that having more women in leadership is justified by the expected positive economic outcomes.

**Extract 12:**

JAG is concerned about the gender imbalance in leadership positions as it will have a longterm impact on the progress of women which will, in turn, affect the economy and Malaysia's recovery post-MCO. Advocating for women's empowerment and agency is important as it directly translates into economic gains for Malaysia.

(*'Stop replacing qualified women with male politicians to head GLCs'*, JAG)

Discourses of nation-building are also articulated to delegitimise negative actions against women by men in government, as in Extract 13. It is from a press statement calling for amendments to the Standing Orders of Parliament in order to curb the use of sexist remarks during debate. In this example, *attacks against women politicians and women's voices* are equated to *attacks on democracy*. Framing the harassment as going against becoming a truly democratic country legitimises the proposed intervention. At the same time, it creates a negative perception of the male MPs who produce the offensive utterances, thus reducing their legitimacy as governance actors.

**Extract 13:**

We must have zero tolerance for attacks against women politicians and women's voices, which are attacks on our democracy itself.

(*'WAO supports MP's call to amend standing orders to prevent sexism in Parliament'*, WAO)

### 10.5.4 Discourses of Women as Victims

The analysis shows that the women's interest groups often invoke discourses that position women as victims—of men, discrimination, unjust structures, and negligence—in order to legitimate introducing or amending laws and policies that would protect them, for example:

#### Extract 14:

Unfortunately, attacks on female politicians and women who are critical of the politics in Malaysia are not new developments.

From the stereotyping of women political candidates, to sexist remarks in Parliament against female MPs, to threats made via Facebook and other platforms against women who hold a critical political view, the political environment in Malaysia has consistently been and continues to be hostile towards women.

It is both this explicit hostility towards women as well as the more insidious and systemic discrimination that prevents women from participating in the political sphere.

(*'Stop violence and discrimination against women politicians'*, JAG)

This excerpt comes from a media statement urging the PN government and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission to take concrete steps to prevent and counter online gender-based violence following social media attacks against Nurul Izzah Anwar, an MP. In the extract as well as the statement's title, women politicians and women in general are depicted as subjected social actors, that is, they are represented as objects of *attacks*, *stereotyping*, *sexist remarks*, *threats*, *hostility*, *violence* and *discrimination*. Their subjection is realised by 'circumstantialisation' (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 34) through prepositional phrases with *on*, *of*, *against* and *towards*, where *female politicians*, *women who are critical of the politics in Malaysia*, *women political candidates*, *female MPs*, *women who hold a critical political view*, *women* and *women politicians* are passivated. It is also realised by 'participation' where *women* are the Goal in relation to the material process *prevents*. Further, the *attacks*, *hostility* and *discrimination* that women face are presented as persistent

and widespread (*not new developments, has consistently been and continues to be, systemic*). Constructing women as victims of long-standing negative actions justifies the need for laws and measures to intervene on their behalf.

Notably, as we move through Extract 14, we can see that references to women social actors are increasingly genericised, from the more specific *female politicians* to *women who hold a critical political view* to the generic *women*. The generic references essentialise women as a single entity with the same problems. It implies that it is typical for women to want to *participate in the political sphere* and to face *explicit hostility*. This approach can be regarded as what Spivak (1996) would refer to as ‘strategic essentialism’, whereby diversity within a group is temporarily downplayed to construct an intelligible identity of marginalisation so as to enable the dominant group to understand their experiences of discrimination.

Women are also represented as neglected by state initiatives and the laws of the country. This is illustrated through Extract 15:

**Extract 15:**

This wage subsidy policy narrowly targets workers in formal employment, ignoring a substantial segment of individuals in vulnerable employment, including the self-employed, informal workers, and unpaid family workers, who are disproportionately women.

(‘*Prihatin stimulus package does not reach women who are most at-risk*’, WAO)

Women outside formal employment are the objects of the transitive verb *ignoring*, which positions them as victims of inattention. This segment of women who have been overlooked, we are told, is *substantial*. This legitimises WAO’s call for the scope of the PRIHATIN economic stimulus package to be widened. The use of the adjective *vulnerable* also exemplifies the activists’ reliance on the concept of vulnerability as a legitimisation strategy. Extract 15 constructs women’s vulnerability through an intersectional gender lens, in that it recognises that women’s experiences vary according to the form of work they engage in; it is particular types of *employment* that are *vulnerable*, not women per se. In contrast, Excerpt 16 uses essentialism strategically to present women as a vulnerable group:

**Extract 16:**

Now, more than ever, is the time for the MWFC to step up and provide the necessary leadership which our women, families and communities need to get through this crisis and beyond. It includes valuing women’s unpaid care work, recognising their vulnerability to gender-based violence and economic



hardship in the wake of the pandemic, and so many other pressing issues that deserve our time, attention and practical solutions.

*(‘MWFCDD Must Get Its Priorities Right: Stop Harmful Stereotyping, Focus on Critical Women’s Issues & Engage Constructively with Civil Society’, JAG)*

Extract 16 is from a press release addressed to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCDD). Unlike in Extract 15 which refers to sub-groups of women workers, this excerpt discusses women generically. The noun phrase *their vulnerability* presupposes the existence of women’s vulnerability on the basis of their gender. This can be a useful legitimisation tactic since if women ‘characteristically undergo discrimination, it is even more pressing for there to be measures to eliminate this’ (Atanga, 2009, p. 198).

## 10.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to elucidate the primary means of (de)legitimation that are employed in media statements issued by JAG, WAO and AWAM in their movement to reshape governance pertaining to gender and paid work. The analysis has shown how legislation, policies and political actions that affect employed women are (de)legitimised through authorisation, rationalisation, discourses of nation-building and discourses of women as victims, all of which are echoed across press statements by the coalition and organisations. This final section evaluates the theoretical ability of these strategies to influence public opinion and political behaviour.

With regard to expert authority (de)legitimation, this can constitute an effective strategy to a certain extent. In order for political actors to present themselves as leaders who are measured and well-informed in their decision-making, they would need to listen to voices of expertise. It could be difficult for politicians to justify their actions when those actions contradict knowledge and advice that promise to deliver positive policy outcomes. Hence, by evoking the voices of legal experts and international bodies in their press statements, the activists could be fairly effective in exerting pressure on the government to act in accordance with their calls for change. However, this strategy can be equally used by the state. For example, the PN MWFCDD legitimised the delay in tabling the Sexual Harassment Bill by arguing that it needed to be redrafted with different experts (Daim & Yunus, 2020). At the same time, public deference to expert authority may be waning globally, partly because people are increasingly aware of ‘the plurality of expertise, of the fact that many problems have more than one expert solution’ (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107) and partly due to rising populism, which is closely associated with anti-intellectualism and mistrust towards experts (Merkley, 2020). Without population level polls, we cannot be sure how Malaysians view experts. Nonetheless, the low initial registration

rate for the COVID-19 vaccination in Malaysia, as a case in point, suggests that using expert-based legitimisation claims has potential weaknesses.

When good decisions rest on expertise and there is a society-wide consensus on desirable versus undesirable outcomes, delegating decisions to experts is often preferred to leaving governance solely to politicians (Skogstad, 2003). In such cases, appeals to expert authority can help secure public support. However, Malaysians hold conflicting views about the roles that women should play, and as Bardon (2020) argues, people tend to dismiss expertise when it does not fit their ideological worldview. Thus, when advocating for greater employment rights and provisions for women, expert authority, and arguably the impersonal authority of international conventions prepared by experts, are vulnerable. For similar reasons, efforts to delegitimise and reverse political outcomes through instrumental and theoretical rationality may not make much headway. For people who are ambivalent about women working outside the home, it may matter little if state decisions relating to women's professional opportunities are inefficacious or illogical.

Invoking the authority of conformity may be more productive as it incorporates elements of popular authority to shore up legitimacy. Popular authority is 'the idea that "the people" should directly decide issues that concern them' (Skogstad, 2003, p. 956). Notions of popular authority have become increasingly woven into Malaysian civic rhetoric in recent decades, in part as a result of the Bersih movement which has given the public a 'greater consciousness of their own right to participate in politics' (Khoo et al., 2021, pp. 87–88). By carrying out surveys and signature campaigns and quantifying their public support, the feminist groups legitimate their position on a model of popular authority that 'provid[es] for direct public input and deliberation in the decision-making process' (Skogstad, 2003, p. 962). This could compel the government to commit to legislative reforms based on 'what the people want', but only if there is strong public feeling. Because women's concerns are not prioritised by Malaysian society, they are not contentious issues with implications for voting behaviour. As such, the state may not have powerful incentives to deviate from established gender governance practices and values. For instance, by early December 2020, AWAM had received only 17,000 signatures in support of the Sexual Harassment Act, and the MWFCF postponed tabling the bill again.

Citing abuses of authority could also be a successful strategy since it can provoke emotions that skew the public towards accepting and supporting the groups' demands, with anger being one potent emotion. Malaysia has witnessed a rise of public anger over kleptocracy, which became an important underlying driver behind the political change in the 14th general elections (Welsh, 2018). Allusions to political self-interest at the expense of citizens in the press statements could trigger strong emotions that have been gaining momentum through the years, which can fuel public outcry for changes in courses of action. However, '[e]motional appeals can fade quickly if not replaced by more concrete and substantive engagement' (ibid., p. 104). Gains in public attention and backing could quickly dissipate with the emergence of another political issue that also taps into public anger.

The activists' pursuit for political legitimacy through instrumental rationality and discourses of women as victims could be challenged by postfeminist and neoliberal

discourses that assume that gender equality has been achieved and that any issues that women face should be overcome through individual hard work, resilience, self-confidence and transforming one's interior life. Such ideas have become increasingly common-sensical in Malaysia (Yoong, 2019, 2020). This could induce many to disavow women's 'victimhood' by men, patriarchy and the state whilst repudiating vulnerability as shameful and positive actions for women, even those that are effective, as unmeritocratic. Yet, when directed towards the government, vulnerability as a legitimating discourse could be useful as the state may be 'more responsive to and responsible for the vulnerable subject' than an autonomous and empowered one (Fineman, 2008, p. 2).

Given the ambivalence and even antipathy towards feminism in Malaysia (Lee, 2018), building gender equality into unspoken assumptions as to what constitutes nation-building and Malaysian identity may be valuable for making feminist goals appear to be not just 'common sense', but 'good sense'. Developing and normalising a collective Malaysian feminist-national identity can be regarded as a long-term strategy that could increase public support and legitimacy for the movement actors' agenda over time. Weaving feminism into the national economic project may also facilitate cross-ideological support. However, it risks reinforcing the Malaysian instrumentalist approach towards gender where women are regarded not as individuals with rights, but as 'economic resources to fit into the dominant neoliberal growth theory' (Chin Abdullah, 2012, p. 104). This, in turn, could impede the legitimization of women's causes that do not directly further national priorities.

To conclude, this case study analysed how women's interest groups invalidate existing power structures in Malaysia, provide 'good reasons, grounds, or acceptable motivations' (van Dijk, 1998, p. 255) for changes in courses of action and attempt to influence public attitudes and political outcomes. Women's rights remain a highly pressing issue in this country; thus, more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that shape and contest the decisions made by state actors in relation to gender. Linguists could examine other genres of political discourse produced by activists and other relevant social actors. Audience reception analysis and studies of discursive tropes that are uncritically adopted by state and media institutions could also be conducted to enable us to draw inferences on the efficacy of the (de)legitimizations and whether they actually do resonate with target audiences (Simonsen, 2019). This will ultimately contribute to more successful strategies and better gender governance.

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