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Juanita Elias

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Civil Society and the gender politics of economic competitiveness in Malaysia

Juanita Elias¹

ABSTRACT: *Malaysian government planning and policymaking has increasingly come to recognise the role of women and the household in the promotion of a number of strategies aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness, bolstering the knowledge-economy and achieving 'Vision 2020' (reaching developed country status by the year 2020). Government planning documents emphasise things like the need to boost women's labour market participation (which is relatively low compared with regional neighbours), increase women's levels of entrepreneurship by expanding microenterprise schemes, and the need to strengthen and support the family unit in order to serve agendas of economic modernization and liberalisation. Such developments can be understood in terms of the widening and deepening of a market-building agenda in which women's labour and the household are viewed as untapped resources in the struggle to maintain international competitiveness. And yet, the greater marketization of women's labour and the household in this manner is, invariably, an uneven process which reflects the way in which discussions of gender, the household and development in Malaysia continually come into conflict with appeals to traditionalist, nationalistic and religious ideologies and identities. This paper explores the role that civil society actors play in the gender politics of economic competitiveness in Malaysia. The paper will draw upon case studies of the role of religious NGOs involved in implementing 'family strengthening' programmes emphasised in government plans and civil society engagements with the issue of women's representation on corporate boards.*

Introduction

The literature on the experience of civil society in Malaysia generally emphasises two features. First, the wide variety of civil society organisations and how these groups have sought to play a role in Malaysian politics, policy-making or processes of democratization (Verma 2002; Abbott 2004; Derichs 2004; Weiss 2006). Second, the centrality of state soft/semi authoritarianism or 'pseudo-democracy' (Case 2004) in controlling and limiting the space within which civil society activity takes place (Browne 2004). In this literature, civil society groups are presented as tolerated by a state that also views them with suspicion and, at times, hostility. A host of legislation delineates and restricts civil society activity, and the state has consistently sought to deal coercively with forms of civil society activism that it perceives to be a threat.

¹ Dr Juanita Elias is a Research Fellow at Griffith Asia Institute.

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However, as Nair (2007a) argues, many of these writings tend to overemphasise the oppositional/adversarial nature of state-civil society relations. After all, any account of civil society in Malaysia is complicated by the longstanding preoccupation with a politics of ethnicity whereby the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) led *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition has fostered the development of a viable and loyal yet politically passive Malay Muslim ethnic majority through instruments such as the New Economic Policy (NEP)¹ (Nair 2007a). Into this mix is added the experience of economic development and modernization based upon rapid industrialisation, the embrace of a particular vision of neoliberal modernity (Hilley 2001), and involving repressive forms of anti-unionism that have discouraged the emergence of an oppositional civil society – especially one in which class-based interests prevail. It is a concern with the relationship(s) between civil society and economic transformation that informs this paper – a focus that is frequently sidelined in studies of civil society in Malaysia. In this regard, the characterisation of state-civil society relations emphasised in this paper has more in common with the Gramscian view of the Southeast Asian state as embedded in the relative interests and ideologies of civil society that has emerged in a range of studies (Hilley 2001; Ramasamy 2004; Sim 2006; Hedman 2006; Nair 2007a).

The paper draws upon the example of government policies and programmes aimed at enhancing the contribution of women and the family to state development projects defined in terms of enhancing national economic ‘competitiveness’ and seeks to examine how civil society actors have responded to this agenda. I point to the role of civil society actors in legitimating state practices that act to (re)produce new market subjectivities that have become central to state-led processes of neoliberal market building. In particular how ‘wives’ and ‘mothers’ are viewed as playing important roles as productive market actors driving economic success and as custodians of those traditional family and religious values that remain centrally important in securing consent for an increasingly neoliberal state-led modernization agenda.

In order to understand the way in which a global policy consensus concerning women’s role in maintaining economic competitiveness has taken root in Malaysia, it is important to first point out that the desire to maintain and enhance the country’s economic competitiveness by building a knowledge-based economy has long been a hallmark of Malaysian economic policy making (Elias 2009). This focus was initially set out in former Prime Minister’s Mahathir Mohammed’s commitment to ‘Vision 2020’ (attaining developed country status by 2020) (Mahathir 1993). A focus that has been reconfirmed in the current Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) and other political-economic policy instruments such as the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) focussed on the broad economic trajectory of the nation (particularly in terms of enhancing national economic competitiveness and the achievement of Vision 2020) that have been developed under the current Prime Ministership of Najib Tun Razak and overseen by the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Permandu) established in 2009. A consensus around the need to promote economic competitiveness invariably reflects the significance that political leaders in the Asian region attach to this concept (especially in relation to national competitiveness benchmarking practices such as the

World Economic Forum's Competitiveness Index (Lall 2001: 1502)). More substantially, the pursuit of economic competitiveness by states in the Asian region can be linked to wider shifts in configurations of power and productive relations in ways that 'prioritize private interests over social ones' in forms of 'new constitutional governance' (Bakker and Gills 2008: 29). This can be related to what Cammack (2006) labels a global politics of competitiveness – that is, how the pursuit of national economic competitiveness reflect implicit assumptions concerning the need for the poor to engage, as productive actors, in the market economy in ways that consistently privilege the interests of capital over labour. Thus 'competitiveness' is sustained through (a) policies focussed on corporate governance reform and privatization that reassert the power of capital (and financial capital in particular); and (b) practices of 'systematic proletarianization' (Cammack 2004: 206) in which poor and marginalized groups are brought more thoroughly into the functioning of the market economy as commodified wage labour.

A central theoretical assumption guiding the analysis presented in this paper is that a (materialist) feminist analysis provides important insights into understanding the dynamics of state-civil society relations in relation to broader transformations in patterns of productive-socially reproductive relations (Bakker and Gills 2003). The concept of social relations of reproduction is employed in this paper in the feminist sense to refer to the kinds of deeply feminized household and care related activities (or 'the fleshy, messy and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (Katz 2001: 711)) so central to the functioning of the productive economy, and yet, generally unaccounted for in conventional economic analysis. Feminist insights can be utilised in challenging assumptions about civil society that present it not only as an autonomous realm of politics but as part of a genderless public sphere separate from the everyday politics and practices of the family, the household and the state itself. As Howell (2005) notes, a feminist perspective points, instead, to the permeability of the boundaries that exist between the thoroughly gendered terrains of state, market, civil society and household. But it is perhaps even more useful to understand state-civil society interactions in relation to Connell's conception of the 'gender order' (Connell 1987) – that is, how state power is central to the regulation and shaping of localized gender regimes based on specific productive-reproductive configurations (Connell 1990), how these regimes exist alongside structures of race and ethnicity (Hall 1986) and, how they are being transformed through engagements with a transnational disciplinary neoliberalism (Bakker and Gills 2003). Accordingly, the state should not be viewed as a homogenous entity, but as one in which there are conflicting and contradictory interests – hence state activities can act to both consolidate and unsettle the existing gender order. Significantly, internal divisions and conflicting agendas within the state open up spaces for specific forms of state-civil society interaction—two examples of which are the focus of this paper.

By focussing on two specific policy issues (family strengthening programmes and policies aimed at increasing women's representation on corporate boards through an unofficial 'quota' system), I aim to demonstrate that civil society actors have been complicit in the promotion of state gender policies that are framed by the desire to build

competitive economic growth. Attempts to incorporate gender issues into development policy through a focus on increasing women's engagement in the productive economy exist in uneasy alliance with a more traditionalist, religious focus on women's roles as wives and mothers. Thus not only women, but the family itself (as a site for the (re)production of good market-citizens) are seen as drivers of competitive economic growth. These two strands of government policy making are reflected in state-civil society engagements. Taking the first example, that of civil society engagements with family policy, an important component of Malaysia's drive for economic competitiveness are attempts to reconcile economic 'modernization' with the increased Islamicisation of state and society. Within this context Malay Muslim women come to play important symbolic roles in debates over the appropriate role and position of women in society – with the image of the modern Malay woman presented in relation not only to her engagement in the productive economy, but in terms of her commitments to traditional family roles and personal religious piety. Hence religious NGOs engage in family strengthening programmes that act to uphold quite traditionalist understandings of gender roles within the family, albeit traditionalist understandings that are mediated by the realities of women's increased economic roles outside of the home. Civil society engagement with state family policy agendas is thus shown to support the uneasy ways in which religion has been linked to state modernization projects. The second example, of women's representation on corporate boards, is a case in which a more progressivist agenda broadly supported by the feminist oriented activist women's movement has gained significant traction in certain policy-making circles. However, this issue needs to be related to how the Malaysian state has sought consistently to curtail and constrain the spaces and opportunities for engagement with an activist civil society. Despite the existence of a vibrant activist women's movement in Malaysia, this issue gained support because of the involvement of civil society actors representing the corporate sector – thus pointing to the fact that the pursuit of women's empowerment agendas is most successful when it engages the support of powerful and influential (corporate and neoliberal compatible) interests within both the state and civil society.

This paper is structured into three main sections. The first of these briefly outlines the way in which gender issues in Malaysia have been framed in terms of a need to build national economic competitiveness. Part two moves on to examine how notions of national economic competitiveness are linked to a broader moral agenda concerning the role of the family and points to the role that NGOs and an Islamicised civil society more generally have played in terms of the implementation of this agenda. By emphasising the role of religious organisations in delivering state programmes associated with the need to strengthen the family as an important component of economic development, I draw attention to the very culturally specific modes through which processes related to the widening and deepening of the market economy take place. The third part of the paper then turns to look at the interesting configuration of civil society and state interests that have coalesced around the issue of women's representation on corporate boards. I begin this discussion with a look at the politics of

the Malaysian women's movement and its embrace of 'market feminism'. The government's promotion of the issue of women's representation on corporate boards, can be represented as a market-feminist success story. However, it is a success story in which the voices of powerful corporate-linked interests predominate and the message of feminism has been subordinated to the market. The research draws upon interviews undertaken with state officials and civil society groups over the course of three research trips to Malaysia (in 2010, 2011 and 2012). The research also draws upon analysis of relevant publically available government documents (in particular economic planning documents), and analysis of a range of secondary source materials such as news media and NGO-linked websites.

Mobilising women to serve the competitiveness agenda

A notable emphasis in Malaysian government policy documents and pronouncements on the knowledge economy is a deeply instrumentalist focus on women's role in sustaining national competitiveness through their participation in the productive economy. For example, in the Tenth Malaysia Plan the claim is made that 'it is essential that women are given the right opportunities, environment and mindset so that they can participate and contribute in the various fields of national development' (Malaysia 2010: 180). Such claims can be related more broadly to the emphasis in the Tenth Plan on the role of 'human capital' and 'talent', or more specifically, knowledgeable and innovative citizens with a 'first class mentality' (Malaysia 2010: 46) in raising productivity and competitiveness. The Ninth Plan had also made similar claims: '[w]omen will be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to be more competitive and versatile to meet the needs of a knowledge economy' (Malaysia 2005: 281). Despite the dominance of female employment in the economically important export manufacturing sectors of the economy, the overall female labour force participation rate in Malaysia has remained low. This is clearly of concern to policy makers with the Tenth Plan drawing attention to the fact that although the country's female labour force participation rate rose from 44.7 per cent in 1995 to 45.7 per cent in 2008 to 46.4 per cent in 2009 (a figure that can be contrasted with a male labour force participation rate of around 80 per cent), Malaysia has considerably lower female labour force participation rates in comparison to regional neighbours such as Thailand (70.0 per cent), Singapore (60.2 per cent) and Indonesia (51.8 per cent) (Malaysia 2010: 178). The desire to increase women's labour force participation has frequently been presented as a way of lessening the economy's dependence on migrant labour (Loh-Ludher, 2009) and particular concerns have been raised about the fact that many highly skilled and educated women leave the workforce once they start to have children (Gomez and Bendahara, 2010). In the Tenth Plan the issue of increasing women's labour force participation is discussed in terms of increasing the opportunities for women to work through better provision of childcare services in the community and the need to further expand the already highly visible group of women 'decision makers' in the public sector to 30 per cent (Malaysia 2010). Under the ETP, a Human Capital Strategic

Reform Initiative (SRI) Lab was established and made recommendations regarding the need to 'leverage on women's talent to increase productivity' that included expanding childcare provision (Permandu 2011: 235)².

Another important strand of government gender and development policy making concerns women's role in alleviating socio-economic inequality via microenterprise development—with a stated aim of creating 4000 women entrepreneurs by 2012 (Malaysia 2010: 178). Microenterprise development schemes for women are similar to the parallel attempts to increase women's labour force participation in that they seek to further propel women into the market economy. Whereas there is a recognition that (middle class, urban) women's labour force participation in the knowledge-economy depends on making available flexible work arrangements and childcare services, microenterprise is conceptualised as fostering 'inclusive socio-economic development' (Malaysia 2010: 139) by drawing marginalised women into the market economy and, because most microenterprises are home-based, enabling them to combine paid work with their socially reproductive responsibilities. Both strategies depend, nonetheless on a conceptualisation of women's labour as an unproductive resource whose capacities can be better utilised in the country's pursuit of economic competitiveness and, I would suggest, accords with a concern raised by Bakker and Gill (2003) over the 'intensification of exploitation' into the reproductive economy under conditions of disciplinary neoliberalism.

The rhetorical commitment of the Malaysian state to increasing women's labour force participation is, in practice, significantly constrained by a failure to support women's socially reproductive roles. For example, commitments to increasing the availability of childcare for the under-4s have depended largely on (deeply unsuccessful) inducements to the private sector to establish workplace crèches (Elias 2011). Women's labour market participation is supported by a patchwork of privatized socially reproductive arrangements such as the employment of migrant domestic workers, childcare services where they are available – frequently in centres that are unregistered and fail to meet adequate government standards such as staff-child ratios and health and safety standards, as well as an increased reliance on informal and extended family support networks. The 'intensification of exploitation' is thus accompanied by a depletion of social resources (Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas forthcoming) that government policies have sought to address via policies of 'family strengthening' (see below) rather than through efforts to better address society's socially reproductive welfare needs.

Family policy and the moral imperative of development

Policies aimed at bolstering women's productive economic activities (as workers and microentrepreneurs) also need to be situated alongside the long standing policy emphasis on women's socially reproductive roles – both in terms of population policies (efforts to increase the birth rate – Thambiah 2010) and in relation to perceptions regarding the central role that women perform in strengthening the family –

perceptions that invariably intersect with deeply nationalistic and racialised agendas especially within the Malay community. The family, and the household more generally, comes to be presented as a key site for the (re)production of economically productive and suitably nationalistic and loyal Malaysians. As Prime Minister Najib argued at the launch of the Tenth Plan:

As the saying goes, the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. The status of women in society is a good indicator of a progressive and dynamic country. Women are the cornerstone of happy families and the essence of a successful nation (2010: 46)

Women's increased labour force participation is presented in government planning documents as an economic necessity but concerns have been raised that women will neglect their role in the social reproduction of labour (fears that are compounded by the increased reliance on foreign domestic workers). Claiming that '[f]amilies are the cornerstone of a healthy, dynamic and productive nation' (Malaysia 2010: 186), the Tenth Plan highlights the need for '[p]rogrammes that instil character building and family values' that will focus on 'strengthening marriage and promoting equitable sharing of resources, responsibilities and tasks' (Malaysia 2010: 187). These include schemes such as the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN)-run pre-marriage guidance programme SMARTSTART (which is tailored to suit the particular religious needs of different ethnic groups) and the Parenting@work programme designed to support young parents. In his forward to the SMARTSTART book (distributed to all course participants), former prime minister Abdullah Badawi overtly links these programmes to national economic success, embracing a modernization script in which morally upstanding and economically engaged citizens ('with a heart for progress') are nurtured within (and not constrained by) family settings in which commitments to 'tradition' and religious values are maintained. Hence:

The marriage institution is the core to the forming of a family in Malaysia. The strengthening of the family from the early stages of its formation can provide a strong and solid foundation for the development of human capital among the younger generation. Human capital is critical to the well-balanced development of the nation. To enhance the current stage of our country's modernization and the progress that we have achieved, we need to empower and develop human capital that has a first class mentality with a heart for progress. These individuals could then safeguard and manage the great developments that our country has achieved through good leadership and management (Abdullah 2006: 3)

In what follows I look at the context within which the LPPKN's work on strengthening the family has emerged before turning to consider the nature of the agency's engagement with NGOs. The LPPKN is an agency that is housed within the Ministry of

Women, Family and Community Development. The agency presents the work that it does in terms of the gender-neutral language of shared and equitable parenting. Indeed, the agency's work in this area is noted in the Malaysian government's appearance at a 2006 CEDAW meeting at the UN in New York (CEDAW 2006). But, despite these rhetorical commitments to gender equality within the family, the LPPKN's work reflects a deeply conservative agenda that needs to be situated within the wider Islamicization of state and society in Malaysia (Stivens 2006). Much of the work that the LPPKN is involved in is presented in terms of ideas concerning the moral threat(s) posed by the emergence of new family forms that have arisen in the wake of economic development and urbanisation. Take as an example this quotation from a former LPPKN Director General.

The most likely family scenario in the coming decades is small nuclear families with high levels of economic activity of both husbands and wives. This is clearly a very different family from the traditional Malaysian family, and care will need to be taken to ensure that family values are not sacrificed on the alter of economic gains, both at the national and individual levels (Fatimah 2007, p. 184)

It should be noted however, that the image of Malaysia as transitioning in a straightforward manner towards small nuclear families, belies the extent to which a greater plurality of family forms exists in Malaysia. Not least of which is the significance of single headed (usually female) households which experience disproportionately high levels of poverty (Evans 2011). But such a story does not fit within a moral agenda that presents the heteronormative family unit as a transitioning yet essential component of development success.

Commitments to the family and family values are operationalised in order to present economic development as possessing a moral dimension. For example, Mahathir's Vision 2020 speech included nine 'strategic challenges' of which the fourth was 'to establish a fully moral and ethical society whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest ethical standards' (Mahathir 1993). A seventh challenge was that 'of establishing a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system' (Mahathir 1993). Thus exposing the way in which moral commitments to family values also serve an important political-economic agenda in which welfare state provisioning is to be kept at very minimal levels.

Civil society engagements with state family-policy agendas: The SMARTSTART programme

The conceptualisation of the strong/traditional family as under attack from the forces of modernisation and secularisation continues to inform the LPPKN's work. Thus the LPPKN chairman stated provocatively in 2010 that 'the family is under attack' and the

deputy LPPKN director general suggested that ‘in developing the future human capital needs of our country, we start from the family. But if that very basis is weak, what will happen to the community and country?’ (Koshy 2010). In recent years issues of declining family values continually re-emerge in the form of various moral panics around issues such as juvenile delinquency, rising divorce rates, the role of migrant domestic workers in raising children, the rise of ‘commuter families’ (families in which both parents have to travel long distances to work) and teen pregnancy/abandoning of babies by unwed mothers³. For the religious organisations engaged with LPPKN programmes, it is precisely these moral issues that need to be addressed through family strengthening activities. Programmes such as SMARTSTART place significant emphasis on the importance of religious values in maintaining healthy and harmonious marriages and family life and faith based organisations dominate in the delivery of the programme. The SMARTSTART book reiterates the afore mentioned concerns about how ‘modern’ living challenges traditional family values. Hence: ‘We live in a touch ‘n’ go era. People want to be free to move about, change jobs, change beliefs even... But marriage is meant to be permanent’ (LPPKN 2006: 9). Religious values are presented as central to addressing this problem:

Families are breaking down and children are leaving the traditional values we grew up with. One of the most important things we can do to preserve our marriages is to follow the guidance of our religious teachings about the home. Whether you are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Christian, if you follow the values taught, it will help foster a much happier home (LPPKN 2006: 15)

There are numerous religious NGOs that are involved in administering the Smart Start programme. These include Christian groups such as Focus on the Family (a US-linked, right-wing Christian organisation) and Calvary Life Ministries (a group that also runs programmes for people who wish to ‘recover’ from ‘same gender attraction’). Islamic groups administering the programme include ABIM (the Islamic youth movement established in the 1980s), Wanita ISMA (the women’s wing of a nationwide Islamic social affairs organisation *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia*), the Sarawak based Islamic Information Centre and Pusat Islam UTHM (based in the southern state of Johore)⁴. Although it was not possible to gain access to many of the groups engaged in administering this programme, interviews conducted at Wanita ISMA provide some interesting insights⁵. This is an organisation that is focussed mainly on educational and family issues and saw the SMARTSTART programme as fitting well within its existing family-focussed activities. These activities include religious educational programmes for members’ children, already existing counselling programmes for married couples, a family conference (held in 2011) and a women’s conference (in 2010) in which speakers sought to emphasise the importance of religious values in strengthening families. The organisation adopts an approach to social issues in which the fostering of religious values and moral codes within families are viewed as central to the prevention of wider social ills. The emphasis is on personal piety and religious devotion rather than

broader structural and political change (thus the 'solution' to the problem of abandoned babies lies in better religious education and observance amongst the young). Issues surrounding the rise in divorce amongst the Malay population are viewed as important area of concern that can be addressed through better adherence to religious teachings (in the manner suggested in the SMARTSTART book quoted above). Thus the SMARTSTART programme which it has been offering for the last two years in four different states) was generally offered by this organisation to already married couples (in the 2-5 year 'danger zone' for divorce)⁶. The organisation echoes the LPPKN's conception of the family as a form of two parent nuclear family facing the challenges of modern society in its work. Thus family educational programmes are strongly focussed on the role of responsible fatherhood (the father as leader of the household strongly involved in the practical and religious upbringing of children). Family programmes are viewed as supporting particular forms of tolerant, family-focussed responsible masculinity understood in terms of 'service to our country, ourselves and our religion also'⁷. Women are viewed as assuming responsibility for the day to day management of the household - a perspective that was viewed by the interviewees as in-line with Islamic teachings on the family.

Whilst the values of the religious organisations involved in SMARTSTART stem from traditionalist religious sources, it should be noted that many of these religious organisations and NGOs are themselves frequently a product of Malaysia's political-economic transformation. Islamic groups in particular should not in any sense be regarded as autonomous civil society actors (in a neo-Tocquevillian sense) given the extent to which Islam has come to be institutionalized within the practices of the Malaysian state. Whilst we need to be attendant to the fact that there exist multiple and conflicting forms of Islamic women's movements, what is interesting to note is the way in which across the spectrum of organisations involved in Islamic issues, women are viewed as playing important roles in the arenas of the workplace, social activism the household and religious practice (Maznah 2006). This is not to deny the fact that processes of Islamiciation in Malaysia have had rather contradictory consequences - on the one hand propelling a number of women into significant political roles and on the other hand sanctioning the reinterpretation of Islamic family law and practice in highly gender discriminatory ways. Within Wanita ISMA, a vision of family-life and domestic arrangements was put forward that sought to present Islamic teachings on the family in terms of the realities of family life amongst the urban Malay middle classes. Importantly, women are not viewed solely as housewives/stay at home mothers but modern Islamic motherhood is conceptualised in terms of how women seek to find a balance between their working and their domestic lives. Hence 'besides the fact that we are busy with our careers and our activism and so on, we don't want to leave our children behind'⁸. This in large part stems from the highly educated, middle class and professional status of these women activists many of whom are able to employ foreign domestic workers to support their multiple roles as activists, workers, entrepreneurs and students as well as their family responsibilities. The social activism that Islamic women at Wanita ISMA engage in should not be conceptualised as feminism (indeed, they view feminist agendas as

morally corrupt), rather, this is a form of activism that seeks to reconcile changes in the economic status of women outside of the home with commitments to religious and family values. This, then, is a 'new' traditionalism thoroughly compatible with constructions of women as good market-citizens engaged in both the productive economy and the social reproduction of a generation of morally upstanding and economically engaged Malaysians, and supported by the expansion of the market for (a racialised underclass) of migrant domestic workers.

Market feminism and the Malaysian women's movement

As the previous discussion reveals, the existence of 'traditionalist' discourses concerning how families are 'under threat' and the need to bolster family values is employed by civil society groups in ways that seek to reconcile more conservative values with women's widespread engagement in the productive economy. These processes of reconciliation can be related to the way in which government gender and development policy-making has been framed around ideas of gender equality being attained through market-based freedoms. Thus the kinds of arguments and issues that many more feminist-oriented women's movements have advocated for have gained greater mass appeal *not* because of processes of political mobilization within the women's movement, but because '[t]he message of feminism can also be subjected to the logic of the free market' (Ng, Maznah and hui 2006:38). Furthermore, 'freedom engendered by the market – and one complemented by a mass-consumer culture – works to depoliticize many of the issues related to reforms and reinforce political apathy in society' (Ng, Maznah and hui 2006:38). In what follows I seek to illustrate these concerns by drawing upon the example of civil society involvement in campaigns for women's representation on corporate boards. I initially contextualise this issue by focussing on the broad patterns of women's politically engaged and more feminist oriented activism in Malaysia, before turning to explore the intersections between market feminism and corporate gender initiatives.

Women's civil society activism in Malaysia not only has a very long history but is made up of a plethora of different organisations with competing political ideologies. There is not space in this paper to provide a comprehensive overview of the Malaysian women's movement although commentators have pointed to the divide that exists between organisations that position themselves more as social service providers and those avowedly feminist and activist oriented groups that adopt a more antagonistic position against the state (Ng Maznah and hui 2006). One way of illustrating this divide is to point to the two main umbrella/coalitional groupings within the Malaysian women's movement – the National Council of Women's Organisations (the official umbrella body for women's NGOs) and the JAG (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality) coalition of activist women's NGOs (made up of the NGOs Empower, All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Sisters in Islam (SIS) and Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)). An important characteristic of the second group is their adoption of transnational feminist framing strategies – witnessed most obviously in

terms of an engagement with the CEDAW process and the language of women's rights, especially in relation to the issue of violence against women (VAW). JAG members have also been involved in campaigns to protect the rights of migrant domestic workers, the group Empower has been strongly involved in campaigning on issues relating to women's political and economic empowerment⁹ and the well known Muslim feminist group Sisters in Islam has campaigned on issues relating to the rise of socially conservative Islamic agendas in areas such as family law (Nair 2007b)¹⁰. The politically active women's movement in Malaysia also includes other groups such as the Penang-based 3G's (Good Governance and Gender Equality Society) that has pursued issues relating to gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment and organisations such as the pro-migrant worker group Tenaganita who, although not exclusively focussed on women's issues, have spearheaded numerous campaigns around the issue of migrant domestic worker employment in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, activist women's groups in Malaysia have all too frequently adopted a form of feminism that is deeply uncritical of state gender policies framed in terms of the linkages between women's economic empowerment and broader national economic goals such as boosting competitiveness. In part, this lack of criticism stems from the (correct) perception that government policies designed to enhance the status of women are continually hindered by both a lack of commitment to gender mainstreaming processes within the state and more traditionalist social forces (both inside and outside of the state). Thus women's groups have been critical of the way in which gender policy-machineries such as the cabinet level committee on gender equality have been downgraded, core feminist concerns such as the need for anti-sexual harassment legislation has been persistently sidelined (Ho 2011) and the ways in which an increasingly politicized Islam has been employed to undermine Muslim women's legal rights and to shore-up patriarchal privileges. Thus any government policies that are seen as pro-women are regarded in a positive light.

Another important consideration is that the dominance of a market feminist perspective reflects wider global shifts in feminism whereby an instrumentalist 'business case' approach to gender equality has become the dominant global discourse through which gender equality claims are articulated. The problem is that the logic of such a perspective is to present gender equality claims as only valid if they fit within a market logic. One of the features of market feminism is that it results in agendas that serve more the interests of economically powerful and elite groups of women rather than the interests of those further down the economic scale. Whilst I would not want to suggest that there are intrinsic problems with policies aiming to increase women's labour market participation and the representation of women in decision making roles – these policies need to be subjected to greater feminist scrutiny. For example, questions need to be asked about the extent to which these strategies rest upon the continued expansion of the market for migrant domestic workers in light of continued inadequacies in childcare provision and continuing assumptions about women's domestic responsibilities (Jones 2012: 267-8).

Feminist or corporate success story? Women's representation on corporate boards

I now turn to explore the recent 'success story' of the decision to implement a gender quota on the boards of publically listed Malaysian companies. This is an important issue because it actually represents one of the few examples of government success on a flagship/high profile gender and development strategy. The then Minister for Women, Family and Community Development announced in 2011 that the government would be putting in place a 'quota' of 30 per cent female representation on corporate boards by 2016. The quota was in fact more like a target since companies would not be penalised for failure to comply with the policy. Nonetheless, in July 2011 the head of the Malaysian Securities Commission, Zarinah Anwar, launched its Corporate Governance Blueprint 2011 which stated that Bursa Malaysia listed companies will be required to disclose in their annual report policies and targets for women's representation on the board (Tee and Lee 2011; Securities Commission of Malaysia 2011: 36). The target was compared with the target of 30 per cent of women in decision making roles that had been announced for the public sector in the Ninth Malaysia Plan and was attained during the Tenth Plan Period. The policy target of 30 per cent women's representation on corporate boards involves not only the setting of targets, but the development of a register of potential female corporate directors and training for potential directors. This training, it is hoped, will also function to highlight to senior business women the need for them to act as mentors and champions for women in their workplace. The aim of such policies then is not only to enable more women to break through the corporate glass ceiling, but also to lead to a shift in those gendered boardroom cultures or 'old boys networks' that have persistently excluded women¹¹. More generally, this policy needs to be understood within the context of efforts to increase women's labour force participation. Concerns have been raised that the existence of lack of adequate opportunities for women in highly paying jobs is a major factor in the decision by many educated women to leave the labour force, the 30 per cent target for women on corporate boards is thus perceived as sending an important signal regarding the need for the corporate sector to increase opportunities for women in senior management positions (Permandu 2011: 235).

In a radio interview, following the announcement, a UNDP Malaysia official engaged in gender and development work argued that the 'quota' reflected the government taking seriously the voices of women and of activist women in particular who had advocated on this issue (YouTube/undpmalaysia: 2011). But who exactly were the civil society actors who were involved in pushing for and developing this policy issue? Interestingly, it appears that women's NGOs played a rather minimal role – politically engaged women's groups had certainly raised issues relating to women's empowerment and the lack of women's representation in corporate decision making, but the policy came about because of a particular alignment of powerful corporate and state feminist interests. One of the most important players in pushing this issue has been the Non-Aligned Movement Institute for Women's Empowerment (NIEW) an

agency that falls within the Ministry for Women Family and Community Development. Established in 2006 and currently headed by Rafiah Salim, the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya. NIEW acts as a think tank pushing gender related research and policy ideas. These efforts were supported by other prominent women including the head of the central bank (Bank Negara) and the head of the Securities Commission. Rafiah's credibility as a key proponent (or policy entrepreneur) of this issue is enhanced not only by her very close ties to many of the key corporate bodies that have been involved in this issue (for example, before heading NIEW Rafiah was the head of the Bank Negara funded International Centre for Leadership and Governance (Iclif) which engages in the promotion of corporate governance through senior executive training) but also by the fact that she herself sits on several corporate boards and has experience of senior executive management during a stint as the director of Human Resources at one of Malaysia's largest private sector banks, Maybank.

Several actors more clearly associated with civil society have played an important role in promoting this issue – these groups are associated with the corporate sector rather than from the women's movement. They included The Malaysian Minority Shareholders Watchdog Group (whose female CEO has played a prominent role in championing the issue¹²), the Malaysian Alliance of Corporate Directors, the National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia and prominent Malaysian business women (Tee and Lee 2011; The Star online 2011). What can be observed, then, is how a particular political opportunity structure enabled the emergence of the gender representation on corporate board policy. Given this configuration of interests, the issue of women's representation on corporate boards tends to be presented as a 'business case' linked to the view that the presence of women on boards improves profitability and has a positive impact on corporate governance. Thus women's presence undermines 'groupthink', and decreases a propensity towards unnecessary risk-taking¹³. It is an agenda that also, it might be noted, sits very well alongside the strong emphasis on corporate governance reform that has accompanied the institutionalist turn in neoliberal development policy-making since the Asian crisis.

Within a country such as Malaysia where activist women's groups are consistently criticised for engagement in political issues, and are consistently excluded from involvement in policies that impact on women (especially in areas such as women's rights in Islam), the corporate board policy represented a rare success. One of the few critical commentaries on the issue came from a representative of the Penang based 3Gs network who argued on his blog that '[b]y forcing the private sector to adopt 30 per cent women quota without first addressing the problems in existing Government policy and structure, the Prime Minister is privatizing the Government's duty towards gender equality!' (Sim 2011). Elsewhere, the women's group Empower pointed out that government efforts focussed on training and preparing women to sit on boards needed to be set against the lack of government support for low income earners such as women in the informal sector. Commenting on the issue of women's representation on corporate boards in its *2010/11 Malaysian Women Human Rights Report* Empower suggested that 'the ministry [of Women, Family and Community Development] should

focus more attention on women's participation in the informal sectors and those working in low-wage, low-skill industries as this group tends to be less visible but more needy' (Chin binti Abdullah 2012: 57).

The issues of women's representation in politics and gendered structures of poverty are certainly much more challenging issues than women's representation on corporate boards. Many activist women's groups have consistently sought to highlight these more complex issues. For example a Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) emerged out of the *reformasi* movement at the 1999 general election and at the 2008 election the WCI ran the 'Mak Bedah' campaign to promote women's issues¹⁴ and women's groups have since the 1990s presented their demands around a Women's Agenda for Change that incorporates commitments to improving the socio-economic status of all Malaysian women. Similarly, in 2012, a women-focussed clean government campaign, Wanita Suara Perubahan, was formed by the NGO Empower and led protests in March of that year not only around issues of corruption and government accountability, but also focussing on issues such as the need for a living wage, the impacts of privatization and violence against women¹⁵. But such initiatives need to be set within the wider realities of both the state's limited engagements with activist women's groups and the global corporatization of gender issues – the increased voice of the private sector in issues of gender equality. On a global scale we can point to the plethora of corporate-led gender initiatives such as the WEF's global gender gap reports, the Global Compact gender empowerment principle's and Nike's discovery of the 'girl effect' (developments neatly encapsulated in Roberts' term 'transnational business feminism' (Roberts 2012)). In the Malaysian context, we need to be attendant to the way in which a corporatized gender agenda has taken shape in ways that clearly privilege the experiences and concerns of elite women. The success of the women on corporate boards agenda was a result of (a) the existence of a powerful and tight-knit configuration of interests centred on particular elite women inside and outside of the state and, (b) the ability to present this issue not only as gender equality measure but as a corporate governance issue – thereby securing wider civil society support for the measure.

Conclusion

Rodan and Hughes' (2012) work on social accountability activism in Southeast Asia points to the salience within civil society of liberal and moral agendas that act to undermine the initial democratic impulses of these movements in ways that support existing (neoliberal and authoritarian) power hierarchies. Although this research is concerned with a rather different form of civil society engagement to the topic of this paper, drawing attention to (competing) moral and liberal agendas within civil society in this manner is in fact quite pertinent in terms of the research presented here. For example, civil society engagement with gender and development policy making in Malaysia has been framed around both a 'market feminist' agenda relating to women's labour market roles and a socially conservative (though arguably, equally neoliberal compatible) moral agenda relating to women's reproductive roles within the family. The

analysis presented in this paper points to how Malaysian women have come to play important symbolic and material roles in a Malaysian modernity project currently preoccupied with the overriding pursuit of national economic competitiveness. The state's pursuit of economic competitiveness and 'modernity' more broadly, has, as Stivens (1998) points out, rested upon reworkings of public/private divides that reflect, not simply, the increased incorporation of women into the formal productive economy since the 1970s but also reconfiguration(s) of state-civil society relations. For example, competing conceptions of modern Malay womanhood exist within localized processes of Islamicization of state and society that have developed alongside wider processes of Islamic globalization(s). At the same time, a rising middle class oriented women's rights activism that has particular relationships with globalised forms of feminism has found a certain level of expression within the state – albeit one in which a market feminist agenda and corporate voices predominate. Thus the institutionalisation of specific social forces within the state occurs in dynamic interaction with the emergence of globalizing social movements centred on both Islam and feminism. These complex gendered dynamics are productive of a state-civil society relationship that simply cannot be conceptualised in terms of the adversarial conceptualisation of state-civil society that dominates much of the Malaysian civil society literature.

Both Phillips (2002) and Howell (2005) suggests that feminist scholarship has tended to have an ambivalent relationship with the concept of civil society – not least because of the way in which a lot of the scholarship on civil society tends put forward a view of the associational world as an autonomous (and gender neutral) realm, analytically separate from not just the state but also the family and the household. In light of the analysis presented in this paper, such a neo-Tocquevillian characterisation is deeply problematic. For example, one of the issues that emerges out of this paper concerns how forms of the subordination of the domestic, socially reproductive realm intersects with other forms of social inequality in society and how these intersecting forms of inequality are reproduced within the associational world. How for example, do the gendered, classed and racialised practices of childcare and other forms of reproductive work impact on the agendas and practices of both women's movements and other non-governmental organisations mobilised around deeply gendered issues such as marriage, the family or women's economic participation? Or why is it that the voices of migrant domestic workers or informal sector workers are largely missing in debates on women's economic participation?

Civil society needs to be conceptualised as operating within the context of transformations in productive-socially reproductive economic structures within the context of broader neoliberal transitions (Bakker and Gil 2003). Notably, the state's active role in subordinating class based forms of political opposition is a key component in the structuring of state-civil society engagement. This issue is most obvious in relation to the case of women's representation on corporate boards whereby corporate interests have come to play an even more prominent role in state gender agendas. But we also see, in the case of family policy, how the state seeks to legitimate a particular policy direction through engagement with religious and ethnic based organisations thus

shoring up the operation of a political system in which a politics of ethnicity performs an important role in maintaining the political hegemony of the ruling party (Nair 2007).

Finally, it is important to point out that the arguments articulated in this paper are not meant to suggest that there is no scope for forms of civil society activism that seek to challenge the market logic of the current government's competitiveness agenda. Many Malaysian NGOs are engaged in activities that seek to challenge and ameliorate some of the ways in which the drive for economic competitiveness is accompanied by gendered and racialised processes and structures of economic marginalization (for example, elsewhere (Elias 2010) I explore the activities of Malaysian pro-migrant worker NGOs). These struggles are important, but they are only part of the picture and we need to avoid characterisations of civil society solely as a space that can be simplistically equated with progressive and/or democratic politics. As the arguments articulated in this paper demonstrate, consent for the neoliberal compatible gender and competitiveness agenda in Malaysia takes shape within the context of state engagements with a civil society divided around intersecting issues of class, ethnicity and religion. In this context, conservative religious values associated with Malaysia's new middle classes and corporate-aligned business interests win out.

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¹ The NEP was launched in 1970 and was designed, through the imposition of various quotas, as an affirmative action strategy to raise the status of the Malay (or *bumpiputera*) population. As a result of its colonial past, Malaysia is a multi ethnic country. In 2010, of the three main ethnic groups Malays made up 60.3% of the total population, Chinese 22.9%, and Indians 6.8%.

² This issue was raised in an interview with officials from the National Institute of Human Development, Ministry of Human Resources (and a member of Permandu's Human Capital SRI Lab), personal interview, 21st February 2012. However, the majority of the current work being undertaken on women's labour force participation involves the Ministry for Women Family and Community Development who have recently started work with UNDP Malaysia on a broad research project looked at how best to increase women's labour force participation. Personal interview with Principal Assistant Secretary, Planning and Research Unit, Policy Division, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. Putrajaya, 27th February 2012.

³ These are issues that have had considerable media attention and were also all raised in interviews with members of the Social Services section of the state's Economic Planning Unit, Putrajaya 11th November 2011

⁴ Secular organisations are involved but are few and far between. One such organisation is *Yayasan Strategik Sosial* (YSS) the social development wing of the Malaysian Indian Congress (part of the ruling *Barisan Nasional* coalition).

⁵ This discussion draws upon personal interviews conducted with the head of Wanita ISMA and the director of the organisation's *konvensyen Keluarga*, Petaling Jaya, 10th February 2012.

⁶ It should be noted that all Muslim couples in Malaysia are required to undertake a pre-marital training course administered by JAKIM the government's Islamic department as part of the marriage registration process.

⁷ Personal interview with the head of Wanita ISMA, Petaling Jaya, 10th February 2012.

⁸ Personal interview with the head of Wanita ISMA, Petaling Jaya, 10th February 2012.

⁹ Personal interview with Empower director Maria Chin Abdullah, Petaling Jaya, 20th February 2011

¹⁰ Personal interview with Marina Mahathir, Kuala Lumpur 9th November 2011

¹¹ Personal interview with Senior Assistant Director NIEW, Kuala Lumpur, 31st October 2011

¹² Personal interview with Chief Executive Officer, Minority Shareholders Watchdog Group, Kuala Lumpur 28th February 2012

¹³ This issue was raised by the Chief Executive Officer, Minority Shareholders Watchdog Group, Kuala Lumpur, personal interview 28th February 2012. At the February 2012 Women in Leadership Forum Asia that I attended in Kuala Lumpur, prominent representatives from the Malaysian state and business community including NIEW director Rafiah Salam, the director of the Malaysian Alliance of Corporate Directors, the chairman of the Malaysian Institute of Management and prominent Malaysian business women such as Raja Teh Maimunah the MD and CEO of Hong Leong Islamic Bank and the fund manager Shireen Ann Zaharah Muhideen also presented this issue in a similar manner (in relation to issues of both profitability and corporate governance as well as the role that women board members can play in promoting the interests of women further down the corporate ladder).

¹⁴ The WCI were unable to field a suitable candidate at the 2008 election and thus created the 'everywoman' character of Mak Bedah in order to highlight issues affecting women in Malaysia that were overlooked in mainstream political debate. See Lee (2011).

¹⁵ The Wanita Suara Perubahan protests took place on 18th March 2012 and involved many of the same women activists who had been involved in wider Bersih campaigns for clean government.