

The discursive legitimization of the political gender gap in Twitter debates

Melissa Yoong, University of Nottingham

Women in Malaysia, like in many countries, continue to struggle for equal representation in elected office and seats of power. Currently, they make up only 14.4 per cent and 19.2 per cent of legislators and full ministers respectively. This paper draws on feminist critical discourse analysis, critical stylistics and van Leeuwen's framework on discursive legitimization to interrogate this 'glass ceiling', using tweets collected after the 2018 General Election as a case study. The election was a watershed in Malaysian politics. After six decades in power, the Barisan Nasional coalition was ousted amidst allegations of cronyism and corruption as well as strong calls for policies of equal opportunities consistent with the idea of a 'new Malaysia'. However, the new government's failure to narrow the long-standing gender gap in the legislative and executive bodies did not generate much public outcry. It is this widespread acceptance of the gender status quo that is the focus of the present study.

This paper engages in a close textual analysis of a Twitter campaign led by feminist activists to demand for 30 per cent women in the Malaysian Cabinet. During the two-month long campaign, Twitter not only served as an important forum for public debate on gender equality in Malaysian political life, but also became a highly contested space wherein hegemonic views on gender were frequently expressed. By examining this online debate, this study uncovers the ideologies and discourses in the public sphere that maintain apathy towards the 'glass ceiling' in Malaysian politics and obfuscate the gender discrimination that persists in the ostensibly new political climate. The analysis of tweets shows that patriarchal attitudes towards women in politics is only one factor behind the general public acceptance of women's exclusion from the ministerial body. Crucially, discourses endorsing patriarchal ideologies are often legitimised in terms of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, and this poses new challenges for women's political organising and ongoing efforts to attain political empowerment.