

### How did you get into politics?

In October 1990, I first joined DAP as a full time research staff. I had no intentions of being a politician. In the period of preparation for the 1990 elections, I had the opportunity to witness the role of DAP in the community. I was also impressed with the commitment of the leaders. I too could relate to DAP's cause for equality among all citizens.

A lot of people were just bystanders – they just liked to watch and preferred to not get involved, especially with the opposition parties. One of the main reasons for joining DAP was because I felt that individuals could make a difference, so I decided to declare and make public my political stand by being a DAP member after the elections.

When I agreed to run in the 1995 elections, it was because I realised that there were very few women in politics. Women activists were always talking about how political parties do not give opportunities to women, and that the representation of women was small. At that time, in Penang, even though I was the first woman to run for office, it was not that the party had not given opportunities to women before – it was only because they did not take [these opportunities] up.

I think this is because women always feel that they don't need or want to be in the forefront, to be in the public [eye]. So I finally decided to run because I had often said that women were not given opportunities, and that now the party had given me opportunities, if I didn't take it up, it would only mean that I didn't practice what I had preached.

### Could you not have achieved the same in an NGO or with other political parties?

I came from a New Village, where they were mostly MCA people. My father was a very senior member of the MCA. I was with MCA for a short time before joining the DAP when I was in the university.

I also was with NGOs before – the Women's Crisis Centre in Penang, which is now the Women's Centre for Change – as well as other NGOs. I feel that the NGOs could only play certain roles – lobbying, for instance. Political parties, on the other hand, have a more direct influence. Now I'm a lawmaker and I have the time to participate in lawmaking.

At the time when I had joined DAP I was [living] on my own, and I was away from home. [My father] did not object, nor was there any conflict.

### What was the initial reaction like from people around you?

My friends would ask me, Eh, I heard you

# FIRST AMONG UNEQUALS

CHONG ENG, MALAYSIA'S FIRST WOMAN OPPOSITION MP  
BY Grace Chin & Jason Tan

joined (whisper) the DAP. They had to mention the DAP very softly. That reflects how the people perceived the opposition then – it was something to be wary about.

Did I believe I could make a change through politics? Well, I was thinking: this would be worth a try.

### What were your influences or motivations for trying to make a change politically?

[In my] New Village, all men and women went to work in the morning to tap rubber. When they came back, the men did not need to do anything. They would go to the coffee shop, drink coffee or beer... and talk, spending their time leisurely.

For women, they had to take care of the family: cook, wash, care for the children, rear pigs... And for the female children in the family, we had to learn how to cook, to wash all the shoes of our brothers. My brother, on the other hand, didn't even have to wash his own bowl! I had often wished that I was a boy at that time! For all the chores we had to do at home, what needed to be done, had to be done, and I accepted that. But I felt differently about education.

I had an elder brother and two elder sisters. My elder brother got to further his studies after primary school, my sisters did not. There was an incident where

he refused to go to school. He was at Secondary Two or Three then. My father scolded him: Do you want to be blind (meaning, illiterate)? After that, he went to school.

My two elder sisters were very intelligent and did very well in their studies. But they could not further their studies because we were too poor at that time. If they went to school, the family would have less income. So they had to tap rubber to contribute to the family's finances.

This was what we all went through in our Chinese primary education: The choice between to stay home, do the housework, cook lunch, and look after the siblings; or to work in the rubber estate. We have all been working since young.

But I used to tell my mother that I wanted to further my studies. I was doing very well in school, too. I told her, Look at my female teachers! Women do not necessarily have to be only housewives or rubber tappers... They can be teachers also! I wanted to be a teacher, I told her.

So when I completed my primary schooling, my mother said, You need to ask your father. My father was okay with it... Our family by then had additional income from the wages of my two working elder sisters. After myself, all my other siblings had the opportunity to further their studies if they qualified

academically, and most of got through to tertiary education, too.

Did I believe I could make a change through politics? Well, I was thinking: this would be worth a try. If I wanted to make a change, it would be here in Parliament, especially in terms of women's interests.

**What did you think were the most pressing issues that needed reform, then?**

Women's issues had never been given due importance in politics because we never had women opposition representation either in the state assembly or in Parliament. No one really took women's issues seriously.

I remember when I was working with DAP [as a researcher] I used to follow the state assemblyman around Penang. I still remember this question someone asked: What is the proportion of female workers to male workers in the Penang Free Trade Zone? And [Datuk Dr] Ibrahim Saad, who was the Deputy Chief Minister then, replied that there were twice as many women as men. He also added, 'So, one man can marry two women!'

That was how women issues were regarded...

**Has this attitude changed since then?**

Yes, it has. When we first came to Parliament, the women DAP MPs definitely had some impact on the male MPs, especially the Malay UMNO MPs.

I do not think that before this they had such outspoken women in the Parliament. In their culture, women are supposed to be *sopan*, polite, *lembut* especially when talking to a male. We were very different; we were confrontational; we would stand up and scold them, and even shout at them. They probably suffered a culture shock; they had probably never come face to face with a woman colleague with an equal status and standing.

But not until after a few events – for example the very 'famous' 'boleh masuk sikit' incident, those phrases with double meanings. Sometimes, being naughty, they'd say 'Okay, you can come to see me, even at night!' And even the other day, one of the deputy ministers said, 'So we are friends, we can discuss things at pubs'.

But things are much better now, although I think that a lot of male-dominated thinking still exists. For instance, someone criticised the TV show, *Mencari Cinta*. Kinabatangan (Datuk Bung Mokhtar bin Radin) said, How can they show this programme on TV? Where one woman can go out with 10 men... how can?

I wanted to ask him, If one man go out with 10 women, then can or not?

The other day, Kubang Kerian (Sallehuddin Ayub) said, in TV dramas when you show wives scolding their husbands, they must be *sopan* also. Cannot be rude! That is the traditional values! Wives must be *sopan* to the husband.

This time around, Kota Bahru (Datuk Zaid Ibrahim) stood up and said, Similarly, in the drama, when a man scolds the wife, must also be *sopan* lah!

The traditional thinking is still very difficult to change... It is changing, but the changes are slow. Change starts from the law. If we amend the law, for instance, The Immigration Act (see sidebar).

There is a Chinese saying that goes, 'The daughter who is married out is like water that is poured out,' meaning your daughter does not belong to you anymore (like spilt milk). This is the type of thinking that is [still] reflected in the law, and this is why we say we need to have a woman's perspective in law-making and policy-making.

And they refuse to change the law, because, they say, We have to protect our women citizens, they might be played out or cheated by foreign citizens! And if we need to take away their freedom to protect them, so be it. What to do? It is part and parcel of protecting women... They never think that most women can be as good as men. And that some men get cheated by their foreign wives too...

**You mentioned earlier that women's issues are hardly brought to the forefront. Why do you think this is the case?**

Women's issues are never in the mainstream. Why? Because you don't need to talk about women's issues to be elected. The electorate is more interested in development, or some tangible gain, not with women's issues. There are no tangible returns.

The other reason is because a lot of women are still not voting independently, using their own judgement.

Let me give you an example: Toni Kassim from the Women's Candidacy Initiative, who ran [for election] in 1999. She's a woman activist, coming from an NGO whose aim it is to promote women's participation in political processes – she does not get elected. Women's issues are not a mainstream issue. You never hear candidates talking about women's issues or pledging to do anything about women's issues.

**And yet, you were elected...**

Even I did not use [the women's] platform to campaign when I ran for my first and second terms: It was only a very small part of my speech. Only in 2004 did I make a point to talk about women's issues and women's rights in each and every speech.

But I think that things are now changing – a lot of women identify with me now, they are becoming more aware of women's issues and women's rights.

The four of us came [to Parliament] in 1999: myself, Fong Po Kuan (Batu Gajah), Teresa Kok (Seputeh), and Wan Azizah (Permatang Pauh). By 2001, the Department of Women's Affairs was elevated

to become the Ministry of Women and Family Development. They have also since amended the Article 8 (2) of the Federal Constitution (see sidebar) to include 'gender' into the clause on discrimination – to not discriminate against race, religion, gender and place of birth. This was a success for us and the NGOs, who had lobbied for this change for a very long time. Quite a few other laws have also been amended since then (see sidebar).

**Is the increase in women representatives in Parliament an indication that women's issues are better represented?**

Yes and no. An increase in the number of women MPs would mean better representation, but this does not necessarily mean that women's issues are better represented. In some cases, the women representatives from the government side won't be able to stand with us because it might embarrass the government.

But we have had cross-party cooperation. The women MPs from both sides came together to issue a joint statement on the violence against women after the Canny Ong case in 2003 – that remains our sole cooperation.

**Who do you think are the role models of the female constituency?**

I do not know, really. Most of us have not been in politics that long to know whether we have become anyone's role model at all. I do not have any role models myself also, actually. But my inspiration might come from within our own party like Lim Kit Siang, or Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr – I do not have a female role model.

**How politically aware do you think is the 'average' Malaysian woman, and how aware is she of the women's movement?**

I do not think many Malaysian women are aware of the women's movement. Even women who join political parties are not necessarily politically aware. I think we still have a long way to go.

Most women, or men for that matter, are only keen to know what they can get out of politics. It probably takes more awareness of how politics works and how it can influence their lives [to see meaningful progress]. A lot of my women friends are very capable; they lead very powerful NGOs. But they have no intention of getting involved with politics because they think that politics is very dirty, with a lot of in-fighting.

I think that most women prefer to have a peaceful life, without fighting or controversies. Politics is very competitive. You have to compete at every level: at the branch, division, state, and national levels. You have to compete to be appointed as a candidate in your party.

It is very, very competitive, maybe too

much for some women to take. I think that women who are already professionals, who take pride in their jobs, who've already competed so much to get to the top – I do not think that most of them are willing to compete again. They see it as a risk, especially for intellectuals and professionals. Why should I go down to that level to fight again?

**What might be needed to reform this political culture? Is there a model or a benchmark that we should be working towards?**

The Scandinavian countries have about 40% to 50% women representation in their parliaments, but I do not think that in our culture and in our country we will be able to achieve this figure in any foreseeable future. Our society is still not very open to the idea of female leaders. The only barrier that keeps women away from more challenging responsibilities is their families and children; we still do not have the policies or support structures – the government is not willing to lighten the burden of women to have them take up other roles.

Even though we have a women's ministry now, it is not working towards that. Before this, it was known as the Ministry of Women and Family Development. Then it became the Women, Family, and Community Development Ministry. The ministry is now drowned in all this community development and welfare work. And I see that the ministry seldom talks about gender equality even though it is in their policies; they are not able to implement any policies which will promote gender equality.

The changes required for this to happen will not be simple ones, and they will take a very long time. First of all, I think that the government has to be very serious about implementing this – that 30% of the decision-makers of this country must be women. Even though the government has said it has adopted the policy, it has set no time frame for its implementation. It can take up to 2020, and we would not know if we can get to 30% or not!

**Are there any specific programmes or policies which the DAP would like to see formulated?**

There are several issues: for example, gender-budgetting. In our current budget, money is allocated according to several factors, for example, city areas and rural areas; bumiputra and non-bumiputra. I would also like to see the needs of men and women, as well as children, considered before the money is allocated.

We always believe that being neutral is being fair. This is not true. Women and children, being powerless, and having no representation, are the weaker ones in our population. If you are just going to be merely 'fair' to them, you would be perpetuating the inequality. You have to give them the extra

attention for them to gain that level-playing field. That's one thing I'd like to see.

I'd also like to see that the Women, Family, and Community Development Ministry to have more budget allocation and more staff to implement and promote gender equality, and so that gender-perspectives are made mainstream.

This means that you would not need a separate women's department or a ministry, because all the ministries would have that kind of awareness themselves, and their respective policies would reflect this.

Take our police force, for example. We should have as many female as male police personnel, and they should both be trained to be gender-sensitive from the start. How you would treat a rape victim or any female suspect? Both with respect.

**What do you think of the media's influence in changing public perception of women?**

This is an interesting subject. You see more and more women in the media industry but again, how aware are they of women's issues and how much do they know about gender-sensitivity issues? A lot of women are inclined towards the perceptions and ideas of the mainstream as influenced by male-dominated society and do not realise that it is mainstream thinking, that it is de facto thinking, and so it must be correct.

And so I think the changes must happen in the society; we have to sensitise the whole population to gender issues. If women journalists are sensitised and realise [the above], they can do wonders with their pens!

**The government, the NGOs and the Opposition are championing a common cause – gender equality. Would a cross-party effort be possibly more effective?**

Politics is never that simple. Although we share the same agenda, we are limited by our methods and boundaries. I think we actually complement each other.

The NGOs have their role in our country, and we work very closely with them. We bring up their issues in Parliament, we lobby, and we keep them informed of the progress. By doing so, we check the [Barisan] women MPs who have to keep up with us. And I think we do a good job. I see that Wanita Umno is also taking a more proactive stance.

In August, [Datuk] Sharizat announced the setting up of 10 childcare centres around the city [see sidebar] where parents from poor families can send their children for RM 100 a month. In my opinion, it is the responsibility of the Government to provide this facility either through a local government or through grants to NGOs to provide childcare centres, and also through employment policies, for example. They have been talking about this since the early Nineties, but are not able to implement it yet. Why? Because women politicians have no power to push

through the agenda, and because men have no problems about having women taking care of their children – this is obviously a woman's problem...

**But even in Sweden, even after the feminist democrats lobbied for the policy for a very long time, it took dramatic social protests by female workers before the government took it seriously...**

Well, if you need it immediately, that might be the way to go, but the whole atmosphere in Malaysia is that this activist movement is not allowed, and not encouraged, especially with the ISA; it is an atmosphere of fear.

But really, there is no movement at all in Malaysia, we are not even moved to ask for this. The women's movement in Malaysia is still very much elite, still very middle class. And even among the educated ones, not many know about women's issues. It's only the few of them who really feel for the issue. Some women activists are born from observing, if you're lucky enough to be born an observer. Most of us observe, yes, but we're just content enough to get along with our lives.

This is our Malaysian culture; the bystander-culture. Many people are very angry about [the ear-squat issue], but if you ask them to make a statement, they will refuse. It's the political culture itself that has made people very fearful and selfish.

**Do you think this political climate has changed under Pak Lah's watch?**

It has opened up slightly, but we see this closure of WaFM, and the control of the media is still there. I think you media people are trying to test the boundaries a bit, and with the electronic media, we will have more freedom. The government can never gain full control over it.

**What do you think we have to do to help with this opening up?**

We must demand, or they'll never give it to you. Ask for it, and if they don't give it to you, demand for it. But you must ask – the people must ask. People must see, they must participate, they must know their right to demand their right to information.

**And the future for women politicians...**

The future is very bright. My message to Malaysian women: Those who want to take part in politics should join now. I think this is the time where even the electorate, even the voters, would say that we need more women. I also think that women politicians have to be wary of this: compared to a male politician you must know that you are more vulnerable in a moral sense. It is very easy to implicate a woman, as compared to a man, in the moral sense...