



FEMINISM AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA

An Unsung (R)evolution

Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad and tan beng hui

Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia

This study provides an account of the multiple struggles of the Malaysian women's movement – from securing gender equality in a patriarchal society to achieving unity among members of a multiethnic society that are further divided along class and religious lines. While most historical versions of national struggles have created icons out of male figures – usually prominent politicians – this study provides a corrective. It details the important role of the women's movement, led by numerous unsung personalities, in promoting social change in Malaysia. A crucial argument is made: that in the context of an ethnically fragmented post-colonial, authoritarian society, an autonomous women's movement which began in the early 1980s had actually achieved significant political successes, introducing new issues into public debate and confronting the dictates of the state. But the study observes that, by the late 1990s, feminist issues were also readily appropriated and instrumentalized by the state and the market. It argues that the emergence of 'market feminism' poses specific challenges for the future of the Malaysian women's movement. Overall, this book combines both personal and academic insights into the construction of an in-depth account of the Malaysian women's movement and the various feminisms behind it.

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Foreword

Humanity's ongoing struggle for new visions, principles and possibilities demands that our experiences of struggle are kept in the people's living memories. This is especially critical for women's movements whose stories of courage, pains and victories are often marginalized and invisible. Keeping our political values and projects recognizable is important because our feminist struggles for radical transformations require both collective and inter-generational reflections and actions. Despite being socially conditioned by dominant ideology-forming forces, a majority of people are still in search of alternatives – feminist ideas and ideals certainly offer a refreshing and provocative viewpoint.

For such reasons, we welcome this historical and critical account of the Malaysian women's movement that has been written by three activists whose lives have been intimately shaped by the women's movement. Written from the vantage-point of engaged social actors, the book provides a compelling narrative of the twists and turns, the victories and pitfalls, the convergences and cracks, and the tensions and contradictions of a social movement. It was a movement which negotiated its way through the complexities and sensitivities of a post-colonial society where tensions of ethnicity, class and religion were felt alongside the democratic deficit of a managerialist state. More than just a record of events and happenings, this book interrogates the politics of the Malaysian women's movement, throwing hard questions on how it has engaged with the state, as only insiders can.

For those interested in women's studies, the book fills a void in the literature on Malaysian and South East Asian histories of social movements. For feminist activists, it is a rich resource of strategies and tactics on various forms of women's organizing and mobilization. For those who have had the privilege of sharing political moments with the writers, it is a testament of courage. This book is certainly an academic and political must-read.

Josefa 'Gigi' Francisco

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Preface

For many years, despite the acknowledged need among women activists to document the experiences of the contemporary women's movement in Malaysia, this intention had failed to materialize. The task at hand was simply not regarded as a priority among those in the movement. While it may have been deemed necessary for the purposes of chronicling its history, in the larger scheme of things – when the everyday battle of fighting for greater democracy together with other civil society groups took precedence – a book project was considered a luxury in the agenda of activism.

Another reason for the delay was simply an absence of a tradition of sharing our stories in a systematic and documented manner. Women activists are more into the habit of meeting, brainstorming, planning and taking on immediate practical actions. It is only occasionally that we step back, reflect and analyse our strategies and their larger purpose. In the main, however, putting our ideas into print to build a knowledge base has not been a popular choice among activists.

It was only in early 2000 that the Women's Development Collective (WDC) earnestly started the process for a publication of this nature. Although the original idea was to document the history of the WDC itself, this was quickly superseded by the realization that there was more to gain by expanding the scope of the project to include a study of the Malaysian women's movement.

When the three of us were commissioned for this task, we were enthusiastic and excited about the possibilities that lay before us. It was indeed a pioneering effort. We agreed to work together because we believed in the value of this initiative. Yet, while we each identify ourselves as feminists and are part of the Malaysian women's movement, we are still different in many ways. And it is our very differences in intellectual approach, career background and social involvement that have contributed to the diversity of insights and analyses in the book's pages.

It didn't take long to discover that we had quite a challenge ahead of us in assigning priorities. If we were to document each and every concern that different women's groups in Malaysia have taken up over the years, it would have meant prolonging completion of this project.

Furthermore, as writers we are informed by our own personal experiences and ideological perspectives. It is inevitable that a partial outlook influences our treatment of many issues raised in the book. Thus we do not purport that it contains an impeccably objective and comprehensive account or analysis of the contemporary women's movement. Rather, this publication should be viewed as one of many accounts that may be written on this subject. We are hopeful that the experiences, roles and importance of women's groups in this country will continue to be reflected, elucidated and debated by many parties.

A major part of our attention is devoted to deconstructing the political feminism of the late 1980s and its subsequent manifestations until today. As scholars we are committed to the integrity of scholarship and impartial assessment by which this book is largely guided. However, we are not simply detached scholars. We have been participants, if not 'participatory researchers', in the women's movement. We have also been part of the activism which shaped the movement's course.

The book is as much a self-critique as it is a celebration. It is as much a denunciation of the past as it is an annunciation for the future. We hope that these critical reflections will provide the women's movement with its continuing momentum to move forward. And we hope, too, that those outside the movement may come to appreciate the complexities of the contributions of the women's movement to the transformation and evolution of ideas and institutions in society.

The title *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution* was chosen after much thought. It was meant to reflect the understated complexities that women's groups encounter in their struggle to promote women's rights. In conventional understanding, 'revolutions' are associated with sudden cathartic changes. The changes brought about by Malaysian women activists in the last 20 years or so can hardly qualify as revolutionary in this manner. In fact, it may be more apt to regard our achievements as an evolution of conflating factors.

The politics, economics and culture of national and global developments have provided the context for an evolving rather than a revolutionizing women's movement in Malaysia. Yet if we were to understand the context in which such changes are being achieved – essentially one in which the state is repressive and democratic spaces are curtailed – this could give new meaning to the term 'revolution'. Indeed, despite the obstacles posed by the authoritarian state, Malaysian women's groups have done relatively well in going against the grain of patriarchy by breaking the boundaries of women's circumscribed rights and in helping to push the limits of democracy beyond what is safely dictated by the state.

Our limitations

In this book the focus of discussion and analysis is on the experiences in Peninsular Malaysia. This is immediately open to critique. It reflects the

subjective inclinations and structural limitations of the authors whose experiences are mainly within this geographical context. The role of the state has constituted the main thread running through the arguments of this book. We felt that women's groups in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak have had a different relationship with the state, given the geographical distance and federal-state structure which maintain an almost explicit social, political and cultural gap between West (peninsular) and East Malaysians. As such, the East Malaysian experience can only be discussed through limited treatment. Any attempt to cover the ground fully would not do justice in capturing the distinctive historical and cultural characteristics of the women's movement there.

Also not discussed are the struggles faced by peasant, plantation and indigenous women, mainly because the women's movement has not taken up these concerns in any systematic manner – which also reflects its rather narrow base for mobilization. This is its source of weakness as much as it is the basis of its gains among specific constituencies, particularly the urban middle-class.

Attribution of authorship

This book is the product of a joint-authorship among the three of us. We have contributed collectively to the formulation of ideas within each chapter and we have had an equal hand in editing, paraphrasing and re-writing all of the chapters. Nonetheless, it is only fair to attribute both praises and criticisms to those who are the principal writers of each chapter: Cecilia for the Introduction, and Chapters 4 and 6; Maznah for Chapters 2 and 5; and beng hui for the Preface, and Chapters 3 and 7. We each had a hand in putting together Chapter 8, but Cecilia saw to its completion. It remains to be stressed that the final product is truly a reflection of our collective responsibility and undertaking.

Acknowledgements

This project could not have been realized without the collective experiences and knowledge of many people behind the contemporary women's movement. The foundation of our insights has been built on these efforts and we thank all concerned.

We thank members of the WDC, especially Maria Chin Abdullah, for their enduring patience and trust in us as writers. Alina Rastam, Fathilah Kamaluddin, Meera Samanther, Manohary Subramaniam, Lee Shook Foong, Wathshlah Naidu, Judith Loh, Jac Kee, Zarizana Abdul Aziz, Julaila Mokhtar, M. Puravalen, Bruno Pereira, Chan Lean Heng, Johan Saravanamuttu, Hew Cheng Sim, as well as friends in the Women's Centre for Change, Sabah Women Action Resource Group and Sarawak Women

for Women Society – all contributed to the substance of the text, which we deeply appreciate. Thanks also go to Terence Gomez who, on behalf of the Malaysian Social Science Association, encouraged us to see this book to print, and to Gigi Francisco, who despite her busy schedule, consented to writing the foreword. For the book cover, we had the good fortune of locating a charcoal drawing by Wong Hoy Cheong, a Malaysian artist celebrated for his socially engaging art. We found *Girl with Mirror* (1985) an apt reflection of the book and we thank him most warmly for allowing us to use this work.

Two people who played an especially important role in this project are Chee Heng Leng and Padmaja Padman. As our contemporary and peer, and as an uncompromising critic of our drafts, Heng Leng's insights and feedback on our work have been invaluable and we wish to express our deep gratitude to her. As our language and style editor, Padma has been quite remarkable in her tenacity to pursue the completion of the book to its end – we thank her too for helping us see the forest for the trees.

We started this project as friends and are pleased, perhaps even secretly relieved, that we have ended it on the same, if not on a higher, note. It would be an understatement to say that the process of making this book a reality has been a struggle. Its completion speaks volumes for the friendship and solidarity that have been reinforced among us and we end by thanking each other and our loved ones for this invaluable experience.

Cecilia, Maznah and beng hui

Abbreviations

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia)
AWAM	All Women's Action Society
AWAS	Angkatan Wanita Sedar (Force of Awakened Women)
BA	Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front)
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
CAR	Citizens Against Rape
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
DAP	Democratic Action Party
Darul Arqam	House of Arqam
DVA	Domestic Violence Act
HAWA	Secretariat for Women's Affairs
ISA	Internal Security Act
JAG-VAW	Joint Action Group against Violence Against Women
JIM	Jemaah Islah Malaysia (Islamic Reform Congregation of Malaysia); Wanita JIM (JIM women's wing)
Keadilan	Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party)
MEF	Malaysian Employers' Federation
MNP	Malay Nationalist Party
MTUC	Malaysian Trades Union Congress
NACIWID	National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NWC	National Women's Coalition
NCWO	National Council of Women's Organisations
PKI	Pergerakan Kaum Ibu (Mothers' Movement)
PAS	Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
VAW	Violence Against Women
VSS	Voluntary Separation Scheme

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WAC	Women's Agenda for Change
WAO	Women's Aid Organisation
WCC	Women's Crisis Centre; later Women's Centre for Change
WCI	Women's Candidacy Initiative
WDC	Women's Development Collective
WID	Women in Development
WLUML	Women Living under Muslim Laws
WTU	Women Teachers' Union
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

1 Introduction

Like any other social movement, women's organized struggle in Malaysia has had to weave in and out through the peculiarities and complexities of the nation's cultural, political and economic circumstances and history. Malaysia's mosaic of state-driven democracy, identity politics and multiculturalism provides the terrain for allowing or frustrating the growth of the women's movement into what it is today – unique in itself but with its feminism existing within the interstices of a state which is authoritarian and nested within a capitalist system.

This book may be one of several accounts of the origin, evolution and establishment of feminism in Malaysian history and cultural consciousness. Yet it deals with a significant and fundamental question: how has feminism, as a cultural influence or a driving social and political force, left its mark on Malaysian society? Does it form the core or merely the fragments of Malaysia's transformation from a colony to an independent nation state? Does it appear as grand politics or micro-narratives in the lives of Malaysians?

To place the contents of the book within a historical framework we first summarize several of the early theoretical perspectives and debates circulated in the West that were applied for an understanding of feminism. Some of the concepts may seem detached from our specific Malaysian experience but we cannot deny the influence of Western-inspired ideas on the course of the women's movement in this country. It is pointless to seek an essential Malaysian feminism unique in its own identity or origins, given that territorial markers cannot curb cultural and ideological exchanges. This said, all of these external influences have had to articulate with realities on the ground. As such, we also cannot negate the fact that national influences and indigeneous norms have given Malaysian feminism its distinct character.

Even so, we contend that there have been many variants of feminism in Malaysia. However, this variation is not merely a manifestation of changing history. Feminism as understood and embraced by society can differ even within the same historical moment. Although feminism is not always successful at uniting all women towards a common cause, it is at minimum an ideology that contests power, ranging from colonial systems to patriarchal

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cultural orders and state regulation. Indeed, Malaysian women are still divided by their ethnic and cultural roots, not to mention differences based on class. However, the construction of a gendered perspective has gained ground because social movements as a whole have depended on women as symbols as well as the backbone of their transformative ideals. Precisely because gender symbolism is a terrain that is easily manipulated by the wielders of cultural and political power, an authentic feminist project of attaining gender and social justice is, at the same time, difficult to realize. The Malaysian feminist project, being a product of historical circumstances and of the way the state has evolved, is an apt manifestation of this condition.

By nature, the state must accommodate many expressions of interests for its own legitimacy – including that of patriarchy as well as that of religious and ethnic communalism. The success of the Malaysian authoritarian state may thus hinge on its construction and subsequently the containment of distinct ethnic communities. Together with this, the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence among Malay-Muslims and religious revivalism in the direction of conservatism among non-Muslims have also provided much leeway for the strengthening of patriarchal authority in society.

Feminists can thus only hope to function within the gaps of this political system which accommodates ethnic-based rather than gender- or class-based demands. This model of governance is often referred to as the consociational model, where the ruling structure is represented by an elite group who purportedly speak for and make claims on behalf of their ethnic communities.¹ However, the state's position on gender equality is inconsistent. On the one hand its authoritarian facet is strengthened by ethnic politicization. On the other it cannot afford to ignore the growth of new, non-ethnicized politics led by civil society groups. These include the women's movement.

This book intends to look at this multilayered and often confounding process. It seeks to explain why the women's movement is not able to fully play a key role in reforming society even though it may have contributed to mitigating the slide of authoritarianism into an even more despotic plane. It is in this context that we review some of the more important early perspectives on feminism elsewhere before drawing in the Malaysian experience as a basis for rethinking the issue. The later section of this chapter sets out the purpose and main arguments of each chapter within the book.

Understanding feminism and its discontents

The term 'feminism', which refers to the struggles of the women's movement, became widely used in Europe, the United States and the colonized countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to well-known Sri Lankan historian Kumari Jayawardena, the concept of feminism is neither a recent phenomenon originating from the West, nor was it imported or imposed from the West into Third World countries. In her classic book

Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (1986), she argues that debates on women's rights and education were held as early as the eighteenth century in China. Furthermore, feminist struggles were already evident in India, Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In Malaysia, Muslim intellectuals in the 1930s, educated and influenced by the reform movements in the Middle East, demanded Muslim women's right to education. The Malay Women Teachers' Union, founded in 1929, encouraged formal schooling for Malay women. Sexual molestation and harassment of female estate workers were already key issues for protest action in the late 1930s in Selangor and again in 1950, this time in Perak.²

Today, feminism has gone beyond its original meaning of fighting for women's rights and legal reforms in education, property rights and suffrage.³ Its definition has extended to include an awareness and analysis of women's discrimination and exploitation in the family, at work and in society, as well as conscious efforts by all – women and men – who wish to end gender inequality. As such, feminism is a social and political movement for changing women's subordinate position. As a movement, feminism is holistic and inclusive. It seeks to link up with other progressive movements for social and democratic change, and it is not exclusive to women since changes sought are to benefit men as well.

In the early stages of feminist consciousness-raising in the West, there was an assumption that because of a shared identity and experience among women, they would be united towards working and struggling together. That is, as women, they would be able to support one another's anguish and idealism. However, this notion of 'sisterhood' – the belief that women automatically relate to and provide one another with support simply because they share a common sex – proved to be a myth by the late 1970s after Black women criticized women's groups for being elitist, white and middle-class. These groups, it was said, had little understanding or, worse, were condescending of the struggles of Black and poor working-class families.

Later on as the women's movement expanded globally, women in the Third World similarly attempted to develop a more indigenous women's movement, away from the dominance and analysis of the West. Given this fragmentation, when we speak of 'feminism' in this book, we refer to a plurality of feminisms rather than of a unitary, if not false, feminism that binds women together. Certainly numerous types of feminism can be distinguished by looking at their analysis, practices and strategies. As argued by Wieringa (1995: 3–4):

Feminism is not a one-dimensional social critique, but a multi-layered, transformational political practice and ethics. The transformation is towards feminisation and democratisation on domestic, social and political levels, as well as towards economic levelling and an end to racial discrimination. But in different social and historical contexts, feminists may have other issues to fight for.

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Theorizing feminism

Early Western literature on feminist theories focused on several main strands of feminism – liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, and postmodern feminism (Jagger, 1983; Tong, 1992). However, it is important to remember that in reality the distinctions are not so neat, simplistic and clear-cut, and might even overlap in some areas. A brief summary and critique of these strands can assist us in further delineating the nature of feminist practice in Malaysia, and in understanding why the Malaysian variant has to be scripted based on local experiences.⁴

Liberal feminism

This strand of feminism is rooted in the concept of liberalism which emerged with the growth of capitalism. Basically, liberalism says that all human beings are potentially rational and seek to maximize their own self-interest. Liberals also believe that the state and society should protect the rights of the individual and should allow everyone to maximize their self-interest, and thus their self-fulfilment.

Following this, liberal feminism believes men and women are essentially equal, but women have been discriminated against by laws which need to be changed. Hence there is much emphasis on campaigns for legal reform and equal rights, for example in the areas of education, employment, training and financial management. Ultimately, the belief is that self-interest and rationality will prevail, and equality as a principle will be universally accepted.

However, liberal feminism has been criticised for looking at the individual as a self-sufficient, neutral and abstract entity. Those characteristics are not equally attainable and are unrealistic as a goal since we all belong to particular groups or identities, for example ethnic, class, sex or age groups, and have different personal capacities and needs. In fact, these structures can act as barriers towards achieving self-fulfilment in life. Thus laws might be passed, for example, in relation to equal employment rights, but this will not guarantee that poor women will gain access to these opportunities, as class barriers prevent the poor as a group from acquiring those rights.

Radical feminism

The identification of feminism with radical politics grew out of the women's liberation movement in the United States in the late 1960s, in tandem with the anti-Vietnam war movement. Many of the founders were white, middle-class, college-educated women, some of whom were involved in various New Left groups but became disillusioned by male dominance in such organizations which supposedly preached transformation and justice. Subsequently, these women came together in consciousness-raising groups and discovered that many of them shared similar experiences of male oppression.

This position views that, as a social class, women are oppressed by men. Patriarchy is made possible by the unpaid domestic service of women in the home and by the exploitation of women's bodies through marriage, sexual slavery, pornography, reproduction and rape. In their belief that 'sisterhood is global', radical feminists stress that any woman in the world has more in common with another woman – regardless of class, race, ethnicity, nationality – than she has with another man.

For them, the way to combat patriarchy is through the creation of a culture for women whereby they can reshape their lives outside of patriarchal definitions. For example, lesbian feminism was argued to be a political act to counter the ideological and institutional domination of male privilege. In terms of concrete actions, radical feminists have been active in setting up women's centres dealing with rape, domestic violence and women's health needs. At the global level they have networked rather successfully on issues involving international sexual slavery and human trafficking.

This position, however, has its share of critics, with the main objection being its universalistic and essentialist arguments. As radical feminism does not refer to any historical context – implying that biology is unchanging and given – it has been heavily criticized as falling into biological determinism as well as being 'class blind'. It cannot, for instance, account for the unequal relations and conflict between poor men of colour and rich white women. In this case who is more deserving of 'liberation' becomes a moot question, one which the notion of 'global sisterhood' cannot reconcile.

Marxist and socialist feminism

If radical feminism views gender relations as the primary oppression in life, Marxist feminism – where socialist feminism has its roots – points out that class relations and the capitalist system are the cause of women's subordination. Because of their concern with the pitfalls of the capitalist system, Marxist feminists focus on the exploitative conditions of working-class women. According to this position, once capitalism is overthrown and class society is disintegrated, gender inequality will disappear as well.

Again, this perspective has been criticized as being functionalist, especially for ignoring the reality of women's position in the household. Studies conducted in socialist countries in the 1970s and 1980s pointed out that women remained subordinated at work and at home – a situation that Marxist feminism cannot explain, as it is gender-biased, if not blind.

Attempts to deal with the 'unhappy marriage' between Marxism and feminism led to the birth of socialist feminism whose main objective was to develop a political theory and practice that would synthesize the insights of radical feminism and the Marxist tradition. Socialist feminists argue that class and gender as well as race/ethnic relations of power are all critical in the understanding of society. No single social relation is privileged, that is

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no one factor is regarded as more important than the other. The struggle then should be equally against capitalism as it is against male dominance in the home as well as against oppression in the workplace and society.

Negotiating the feminist impasse: postmodern feminism

The experiences of the women's movement point out that there are different paths to feminist analysis and practice. Women have proven to be divided, sometimes extremely so on the basis of ideology, class, ethnicity, culture, age or sexuality. For example, some Black women say they have more in common with Black men than with white middle-class women. Women in apartheid South Africa found solace in their families, questioning the Western critique of the family as the first site of women's oppression. Others in the South find that problems of poverty and indigenous women's issues are not the concern of women in the First World.

In recent times, a new strand of feminism – postmodern feminism – has emerged in response to this situation and critiqued the feminist movement for replacing one universal, rational, male subject perspective with another universal idea of 'woman', 'gender' or 'sex'. Hence postmodern feminists reject traditional assumptions about truth and reality and refuse to construct a unitary theory on gender subordination.

While postmodern feminists have been applauded for recognizing diversity among women, they have been equally castigated for being too preoccupied with dissecting and analysing 'truths' and for deconstructing diversity, multiplicity and difference. In turn, as a theory that is meant to inform practice, postmodern feminism has often been criticized for causing paralysis, if not chaos, among activists (Tong, 1992: 232).

The relationship between feminism and the women's movement

The role of the women's movement

The women's movement can take a diversity of forms and interests. Taking off from Wieringa (1995: 7), a women's movement is defined as 'the whole spectrum of conscious and unconscious individual or collective acts, activities, groups or organisations concerned with diminishing gender subordination, which is understood as intersecting with race and class oppression'. It is also true that there might be and have been disagreements among various segments of the movement in relation to agendas, strategies and demands.⁵

To deal with the question of agenda-setting and autonomy, Molyneux (1998: 70) describes three ideal types of women's movements – independent, associational and directed. Independent movements function on the basis of women's self-activity and organization which recognize no superior authority. Associational movements choose to form alliances with other

political organizations, while directed movements receive their authority and direction from a higher 'order', typically political organizations or from the government. Feminists are usually more concerned with independent and autonomous organizations where women establish their own goals, organizational forms and types of struggle. In the real world there are and will be shifts and inter-connections among these groups depending on the historical context, and the nature of the issues debated.

A more critical perspective of movements or movement-building is offered by Indian feminist Batliwala:⁶

First of all a movement is a political process. A movement always has a political agenda and it is a political agenda that is about changing two things. One is the nature of resources and the distribution of resources. Movements are partly about mobilizing and redistributing resources in more equitable ways. And two, I think that movements are about ideologies and policies that flow out of ideologies. Movements are about changing power relations.

In her analysis of the role of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), she further argues that:

The first priority of NGOs should be to catalyse and enable the formation of grassroots women's organisations. We cannot speak of a 'women's movement' without this kind of grassroots base . . . You can have millions of organisations as we indeed do have in South Asia, without them constituting a movement.

Similar caution is underscored by Griffen (2002: 10) who states:

Despite the inspiring and increasingly diverse forms of women's resistance these many activities do not a movement make. What is meant by 'the women's movement' now needs to be analysed by women, especially with respect to its role, strategies and impact on women's rights in the long run. There needs to be clarification as to whether there is a movement at all or whether 'the women's movement' is now being equated, both externally and by feminists, to the collective of women's NGOs and networks, even if they do not act collectively or organise as a movement.

If one were to adhere to Batliwala's definition of a women's movement, then it is clear that the Malaysian women's movement is not a movement at all, as there is no mass-based women's grassroots movement to speak of – particularly in the sense of the redistribution of resources and the transformation of power, including gender relations in society. But, as will be seen in the following chapters, there have been mass organizations of women as categorized by

Molyneux and there have been various women's NGOs which have acted in collective fashion, as described by Griffen.

At the end of the day what would be useful is to analyse the evolution of these movements, the conditions of their existence and growth as well as their strategies and impact on women's rights in each situation. What is unique in the Malaysian case is also the centrality of Islam and its repercussions on a multicultural polity. This creates a more complex picture of the trajectory of the women's movement, compared with that painted by the commentators cited. To reiterate the points made earlier we have chosen to look at the origins of Malaysian feminism as being influenced by structural and cultural changes as well as upheavals marking the country's transition from one historical phase to the other.

The state and the women's movement: what price?

The notion of the state has received different treatments from various authors. It can be seen from an organizational perspective as simply 'a set of governmental institutions . . . making rules, controlling, guiding or regulating' or in relation to its consequences, which is the maintenance of social order by acting as a surveillance system (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987: 1–6). In everyday understanding the government is the state and the government has the right to control and coordinate all public activities.

Although the state is meant to be a mediator of the many interest groups in society, it is hardly viewed as being totally neutral, not just in the Malaysian context but everywhere else too. It has been pointed out that in a capitalist society the state's main job is to maintain favourable conditions for capitalist enterprise and capital accumulation so that state revenue can be assured (Macpherson, 1989: 23).

However, the modern state can only survive if it has political legitimacy. Although its primary function is to preserve the continuity of capital accumulation, it must ultimately derive electoral legitimacy, and must to a certain extent give in to popular pressure, even if this may occasionally conflict with economic interests (Boreham et al., 1989: 261–2). In this sense the state functions as a contradictory entity because it is selectively authoritarian and arbitrarily democratic at the same time.

It is in this context that we problematize the relationship of the women's movement to the state, another key theme in the book. As argued by Molyneux and Razavi (2002: 24), 'The central instrument for the protection of rights has been, and must remain, the state.' Whether states protect and/or advance women's rights depends on the political regime and how women's groups engage with such regimes. It has been shown that democratic institutions and procedures are more sympathetic to women's concerns, although there is a tendency for women's groups to become co-opted in the process. Similarly non-democratic regimes also seek to woo women to secure their power base, as in the case of Peru where a large number of women assumed

public positions and came into national prominence under the dictatorship of President Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s (Blondet, 2002).

Women's movements engage in the terrain of civil society. Like feminism and the women's movement, the term 'civil society' is a contested concept. This book adopts the definition of civil society as 'the existence of an independent public space from the exercise of state power, and the ability of organizations within it to influence the exercise of state power' (Bernhard, cited in Valte, n.d.). The relationship between civil society and the state, as an arena of political contestation, can thus take varying forms – collaboration, co-optation, resistance and subversion. Women's movements as part of civil society – that space between the individual and the state – cannot avoid engaging with the state, as a site and instrument of power. If the women's movement has been successful in realizing its quest for gender equality at all through its engagement with the state, will it have to pay a price for this? One objective of this book is thus to problematize the relationship of Malaysian feminism with the authoritarian state, particularly the inability of the women's movement to successfully mobilize against state control over its direction.

The crafting of Malaysian feminism

The feminist theories discussed earlier, while useful as a start, have not dealt with multicultural contexts or addressed the problems faced by many countries in the South. In multiethnic Malaysia, situated within the belly of a globalizing economy and driven by an authoritarian state, the women's movement has had to carve a niche for itself to prove its relevance and be regarded as a mover of the democratization process. In this book we attempt to look at how Malaysian feminism has evolved within these contexts.

Distinctive historical moments have engendered many forms of feminist politics and practices. Indeed, the emergence of what we call nationalist feminism, social feminism, political feminism and market feminism have coincided as markers of the country's transformation from colonialism to a post-*Reformasi* state. The latter arose out of the sacking, in September 1998, of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister. The episode triggered widespread protests among Malays, civil society groups and Islamic youths against then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, stimulating spontaneous calls for *Reformasi* (reform). Anwar's subsequent assault at the hands of the police chief while in custody and a highly questionable trial that convicted him of corrupt practice and sexual misconduct and jailed him for 15 years all fed into this movement.

This is not to say that different historical periods have been marked by a distinctive feminist discourse and practice. All kinds of feminisms may have overlapped and existed in all periods. What is argued here is that the different historical contexts formed the backdrop for the emergence of one dominant form of feminist expression and agency over others.