Rebellion and Autonomy in Industrializing Penang: The Career History of a Young Malay Divorcee

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Social Change in Malaysia

Accelerated economic development accompanied by increasing awareness of ethnic and religious identity characterizes the post-colonial Malaysian society into which Maimunah, a Malay divorcee in her mid-twenties, was born. Preoccupation with redistribution of national wealth along ethnic lines became a dominant political theme as commercial agriculture, manufacturing and urban based employment expanded from the late 1960s through the decade of the seventies. Ethnic quotas were adopted as a principle of economic allocation during this period. This policy intensified ethnic consciousness, particularly on the part of Malays, the intended beneficiaries of the redistributive measures. Since the beginning of the 1970s, assertion of Malay identity has spread among young Malays as they began moving from unremunerative subsistence agriculture to urban commercial occupations. It has assumed particular importance in the competition for access to education.

The new redistributive programme favouring Malays has profoundly affected the Malay community in general and Malay women in particular. The provision of education to rural Malay women, beginning in the 1950s, enabled them to actively respond to the economic opportunities which suddenly opened up in the early 1970s. The young Malay women who have entered the modern sectors of the economy over the past decade generally have at least primary school, and in many cases secondary school, education. A small proportion of these women have also had the opportunity to acquire some knowledge of English. Few of the mothers of the new generation of rural Malay women ever attended primary school or attained basic literacy. An arranged marriage soon after puberty, early childbearing and productive activities confined to the domestic sphere, subsistence agriculture, or petty trade set the parameters of life choices for the older generation of Malay women. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers, young Malay women enjoy the option of delaying marriage to continue their education, working for wages outside the household, or remaining at home to help their parents with domestic or agricultural chores. After an extended period of education and/or paid employment, young Malay women are often able to exert a high degree of personal preference in selection of a marriage partner.

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The multinational electronics investment has in significant respects made possible increased autonomy for rural, relatively well-educated Malay women. The ready availability of electronics jobs offering regular wages and air-conditioned, hygienic work conditions motivated educated, young Malay women to migrate from rural villages to urban areas. Malay parents, though worried about their daughters' safety away from the protective family and village environment, welcomed the prospect of cash contributions to the household. Migration and cash earnings have enabled unmarried Malay women to help their parents economically and also to enjoy unprecedented independence in the urban, Westernized social milieux where the factories are located.

Widespread opportunities for factory employment have contributed much to transforming the economic and social role of young Malay women. Female factory workers have become important supplemental wage-earners within their households. Although the young women workers do not earn high enough wages to support their families, they nevertheless reduce their parents' burden in rearing the younger members of the household by assuming major responsibility for their own future marriage expenses and by defraying the cost of their siblings’ school uniforms, books and transportation with their cash remittances. In providing their parents with modern consumer goods, the factory workers also introduce their households to images of urban living along with new values and aspirations. Together with other wage-earners in the households, the young women pool their small savings to purchase such luxuries as furniture, expensive kitchenware, television sets, cassette tape recorders and refrigerators for the family. Industrial employment opportunities have increased young women’s capacity to contribute to the household economy and have given parents an incentive to encourage their daughters to delay marriage.

However, vulnerability to new forms of exploitation offsets women factory workers’ gains in autonomy. Young women are sought by the electronics industry as a docile, cheap labour force that can be easily retrenched in response to the sudden, sharp world market fluctuations to which the industry is periodically subject. Government co-operation with the electronics firms’ management to depress wages and to discourage trade union activity is an essential condition for multinational electronics investment in Malaysia. The alliance between management and government prevents the workers from improving their conditions of employment. Electronics production operators are compelled to accept low wages, insecurity and few promotional prospects or opportunities to acquire transferable skills. They are exposed to chemical and radiation hazards, and are subjected to exhaustion from rotating shifts, microscope work and speed-ups. On the other hand, production operators in the electronics firms’ home countries enjoy the benefits of well-enforced protective labour legislation and work under substantially better conditions than their Malaysian counterparts. Though Malay female factory workers in Penang have on occasion organized themselves to demand improved wages and work conditions, they have not yet succeeded in winning significant gains in the face of the combined power of the electronics firms’ management and the Malaysian government.

Outside the factory, female electronics workers experience social stigma and condemnation. Negative perceptions of electronics workers originated in the island state of Penang in northern Malaysia where the multinational electronics industry was initiated in 1972. The establishment of electronics firms alongside the flourishing