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GENDER EQUITY IN THE SARAWAK STATE CIVIL SERVICE

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1. Why Gender Equity?

I start this paper with this question because it was posed to me by a senior state government official who wanted to know why a study on gender equity in the civil service was required in the first place. I decided that this is a good starting point in which to place this study in context.

Gender equity is an issue of human rights based on the ideal of equal rights of all human beings regardless of gender. Gender equity is therefore a matter of social justice and social transformation aimed at enhancing the quality of human life through women's improved position in society. An integral part of this concept is the ideal of fairness in our treatment of both women and men. The commitment of the Malaysian government towards gender equity was affirmed when the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified in 1995 and the national report on Malaysia's progress was presented in the UN in 2006. An outcome of the ratification of CEDAW was the amendment to the Federal Constitution in 2001, where Article 8(2) of the Constitution was amended to include the word 'gender' as one of the grounds in which discrimination is prohibited (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2007: 27).

Gender equity in employment is increasingly seen as an important component of the nation's development agenda as gender discrimination hinders productivity, efficiency, progress and the country's ability to raise living standards. Organisations which previously thought that gender and family issues were outside their domain of interest or that gender and family friendly policies were too expensive were now re-evaluating their stance. In a competitive global environment, organisations are

increasingly recognising that they need the able and productive contribution of all available human resources regardless of their gender.

When the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development launched its Gender Gap Index in 2007, it was found that the highest level of gender disparity were in the women's share of elected parliamentarians, appointed senators, legislators, senior officials, managers, associate professionals and technicians (ibid: 6). The labour force participation rate also had a dismal showing. In 2004, the labour force participation rate of females was 47.3 percent in comparison to 80.9 percent for men (ibid: 17). The government is the single largest employer and the number of government employees increased almost three fold from 1967 to 2002 (Jamilah, 1994 in Maimunah ismail & Aminah Ahmad (eds.)(1999): 17, *Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam*, 2002¹). In 1991, the national figure for women in the civil service was 31 per cent. A decade later, in 2002, the figure had gone up to 46 per cent (*Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam*, 2002). However, the rise in women's employment in the civil service showed that the structure of female employment were in traditionally feminised sectors. In 2002, the largest proportion of female employees was in education (52%), administration and support (21%) and health (15%). These three sectors alone accounted for 88 per cent of all women in government service (*Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam*, 2002).

Women in key decision-making positions within the government bureaucracy are seen as vital for the advancement of women as adequate representation of women's interests is crucial. In fact, a term coined in the West to label this new breed of gender sensitive women in government bureaucracy is feminocrats. However women in the Malaysian civil service were mainly at the bottom of the work hierarchy with women in the professional salary group ("A" salary group) constituting a mere 10.5 per cent in 1991 [Maimunah Ismail & Aminah Ahmad (eds.)(1999): 17]. In 2004, women's percentage share of legislators, senior officials, managers, associate professionals and technicians was 35 percent while that of men was 65 percent (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2007: 19). In its draft report of CEDAW (ibid, 2004), the Ministry cited family responsibilities as a major obstacle to women's career advancement. According to the report, women employees were

¹ See Appendix I

often too burdened with child-care and family responsibilities to take up opportunities for further training. Although many wives would take no-pay leave to support their husbands in their pursuit of higher academic qualifications, few husbands would do likewise for their wives. Hence, a woman often sacrificed her own career advancement for her husband's. Even when women do take up further training opportunities, it was often late in their careers in comparison to men's.

2. About this study

In January 2002, the Women's Bureau, Ministry of Social Development and Urbanisation in Sarawak commissioned a study of women's employment participation in the state civil service after initial investigation revealed that it was heavily lop-sided in terms of gender. This paper is the result of this study. The employment databases kept by the Human Resource Management Unit in the Chief Minister's Department and data on job applicants kept by the Public Services Commission² were sex segregated and analysed. Staff employed by statutory bodies and local government were therefore excluded. Information was mined from these databases in August 2002. As the databases were constantly updated and aggregated, we were unable to provide a time series or show trends. However, we have tried to do so where data was available. This paper presents the findings of this first baseline study which is a snapshot of the employment status of state civil servants as of August 2002. In November of the same year, a new remuneration system for civil servants (*Sistem Saraan Malaysia* – SSM) took effect and the employment classification changed. However, many in the civil service will still recognize the classifications in this paper.

In Sarawak in April 2002, women civil servants constituted a mere 19 per cent (10,719 male staff in comparison to only 2,557 female staff. In other words, the ratio of male to female staff in the state civil service was 4.2: 1. This is in comparison to the national ratio of male to female government employees in 2002 which stood at 2.3: 1. This national gender ratio is

² The Public Services Commission processed job applicants with qualifications of diploma and below. The Human Management Unit in the Chief Minister's Department handles applicants with university degrees.

obtained after excluding those in classification D (education), U (health and medicine) and M (diplomatic service). Classification D and U are excluded as the large numbers at the national level in comparison to the state level would distort the picture. In addition, classification M (diplomatic service) was excluded as there was no such classification in the state civil service.

As the state figures showed that there is less gender parity in comparison to national figures for comparable schemes of service, it was decided that it would be useful to find out why this was so and to identify the distribution of women employees in the state civil service. Special attention would also be given to the administrative category (N) as most of the female civil servants in Sarawak are in this category. Amongst other things this paper will include data on the distribution of female and male staff in the various work strata, the monthly basic earnings of female and male staff and the number of women and men in key decision-making positions. We did not conduct any interviews with employees because protection of respondents through anonymity would be difficult and state employees were fearful of talking about their situation. This is a drawback but one which is inevitable given the parameters of this study.

3. Findings

3.1 OVERALL GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF STATE EMPLOYEES

3.1.1 By intake

Employee intake from 1970 to 2002 has irregular with peaks in the early 1970s, 1981-82, 1987, 1993 and 1996-97. Contraction occurred in years of global recession especially between 1984-87, 1990-91, 1995 and 2000. The largest intake was in 1993 for male recruits and 1997 for female recruits while the lowest was in 1991 for both sexes. **Throughout the three decades, more men were recruited than women.** In the 1970s, male recruitment was almost seven times more than women. In the 1980s, male recruitment was five times more than women and in the 1990s, male recruitment were three times more than women.