The Discursive Legitimation of the Political Gender Gap in Twitter Debates

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A New Malaysia?

61 Years of Single Coalition Rule

- Barisan Nasional: 1957-2018
- Ethnicised political system
- Pro-Malay preferential policies
- Discriminatory
- Wealth-accumulation by elites

14th General Election (9 May 2018)

- A decade of public protests against cronyism, corruption, 1MDB scandal, etc.

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- Won by Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope)
- Coalition of opposition parties

A New Malaysia?

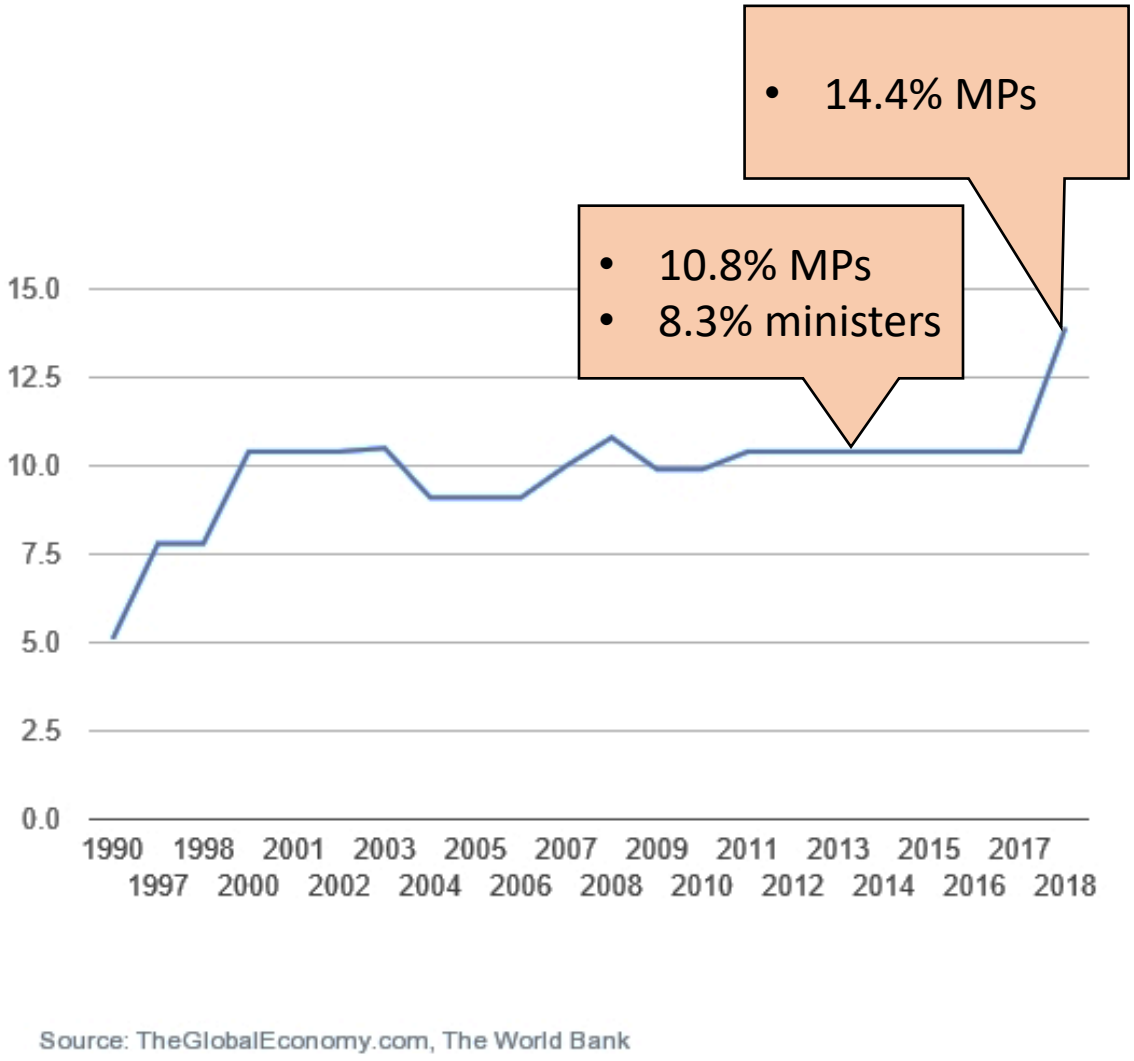
- Equal opportunities
- Greater social justice
- “Justice for All”

Justice and Equality for All?

Low Representation of Women in Parliament

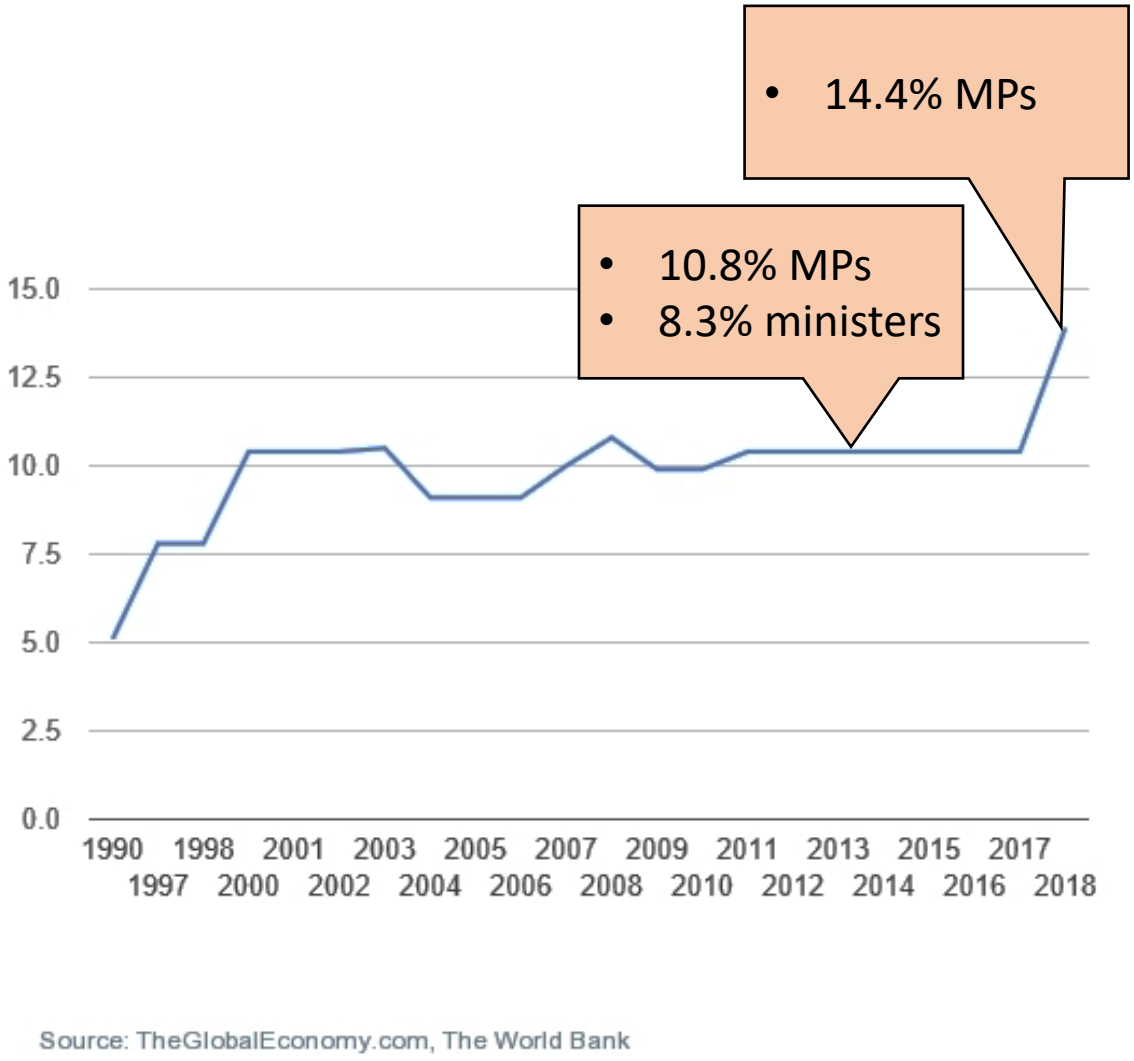
- Significant problem
- GE14: 32 women MPs
- 137 / 194 countries

(% of women MPs) (IPU 2018)



Low Representation of Women in Parliament

- Gender gap in candidacy
- Pakatan Harapan election pledge: 30% women in all levels of governance
- But only 85/660 candidates



Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com, The World Bank

The #30peratus Campaign

- 10 May – 2 July

Women's rights advocates released statement calling for at least 30% women in Cabinet

#30peratus Twitter campaign

The Current Cabinet

- 2 July
- 1st woman DPM
- 5 ministers (19%)
- 4 dep. ministers (17%)
- Little public outcry – why?

The Case Study

Aim

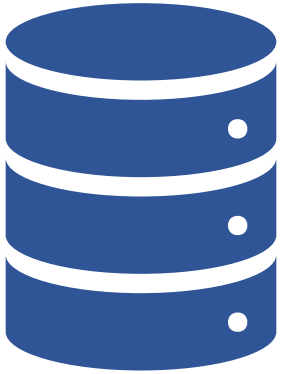
- To develop a better understanding of the **ideologies and discourses that keep public pressure for gender reform at a low level**
- #30peratus Twitter campaign as a case study
  - **Important forum for public debate** on gender equality in Malaysian politics
  - Highly contested space - **hegemonic views on gender** were frequently expressed
  - Provides a lens on varying perspectives on women's participation in high public office

Limitations

- Twitter content as **reflection of the ideological positions of Malaysian tweeters** on women's low representation in cabinet
- Cannot be generalised
- **Useful gateway** for identifying the ideologies and discourses in the public sphere that maintain acceptance of the gender status quo in politics

The Data

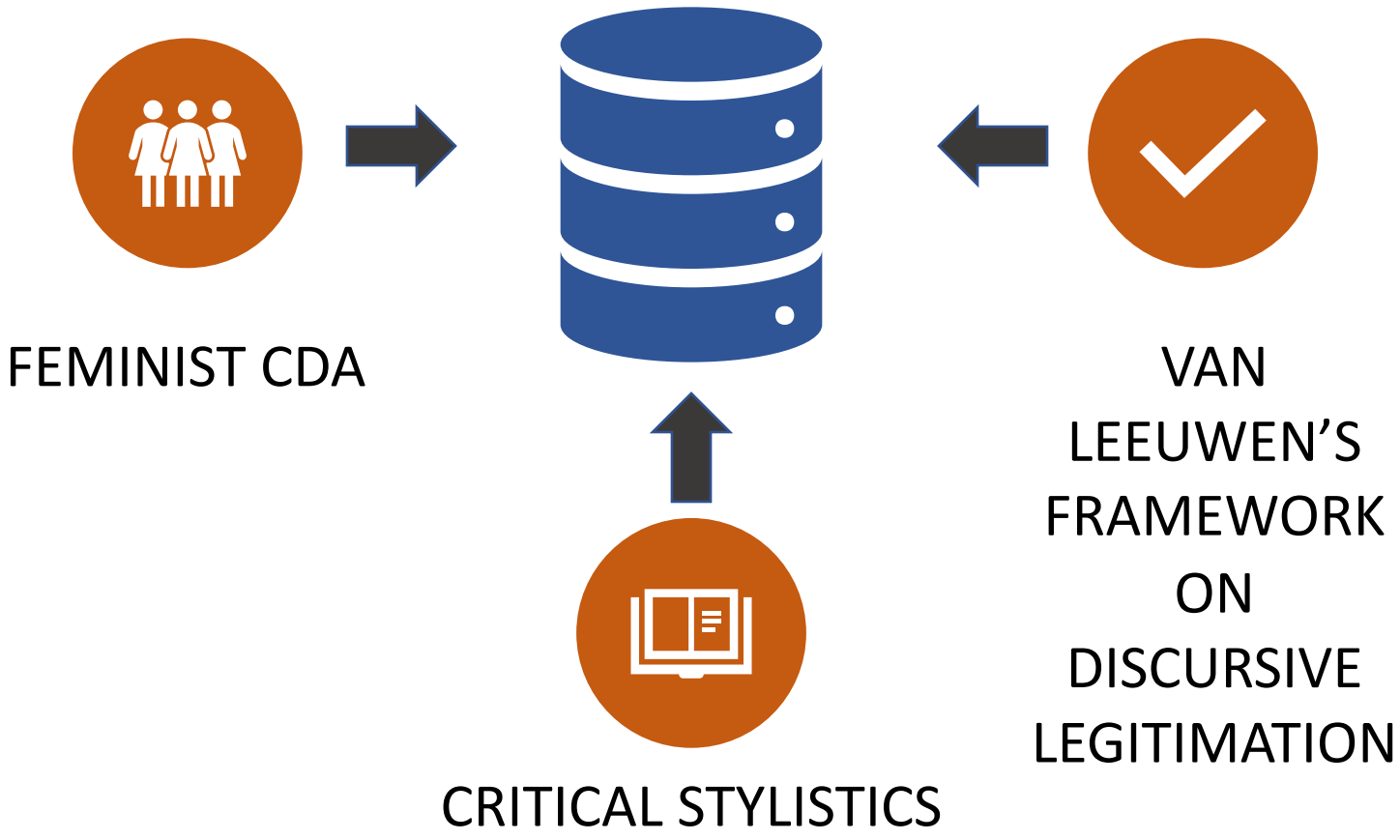
- Public tweets containing #30peratus or #30percent (10 May - 2 July)
- Public replies
- Relevant retweeted posts
- Any visible text in memes and hyperlinks



2,000 tweets and replies

- Hashtagged posts that do not discuss women's political representation in Malaysia

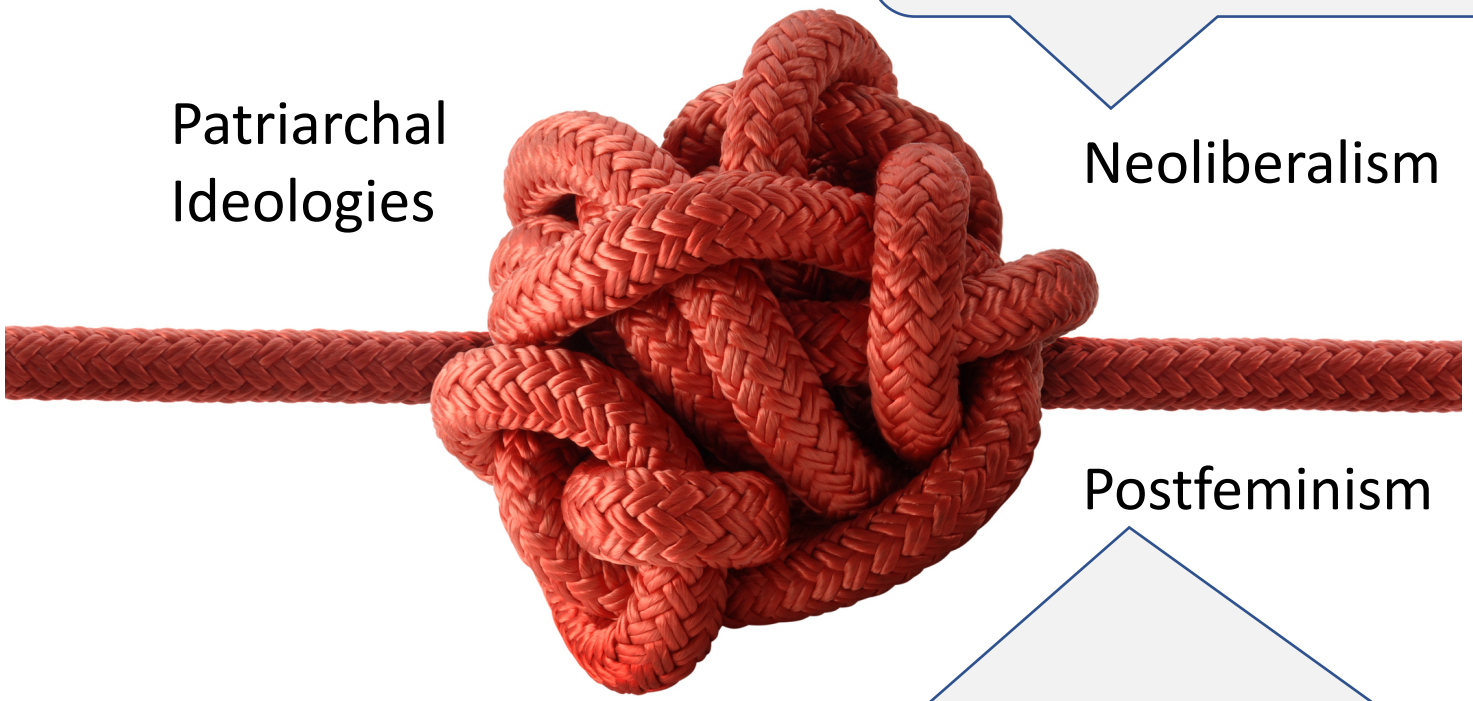
Analytical Approaches



What did I find?

System of thought in favour of privatisation, self-interest & self-reliance

Patriarchal Ideologies



Neoliberalism

Postfeminism

Celebrates selected feminist ideas, e.g. women's empowerment & autonomy. Insists that gender equality has been achieved, & feminism is redundant (McRobbie, 2004)

‘Women are not up to the job’

Honestly just for the start ignore **the gender** and go for merit first. They are starting with 10 ministries first. Get the most capable in then do **the inclusiveness thing** later. Also sidenote at cabinet level, experience and character are as important as qualifications

- The imperative and sequence adverb trigger a value assumption
- **The gender** of the MPs should be *ignored* and **the inclusiveness thing** should be done *later* → enhancing gender diversity in cabinet (i.e. selecting more women) = undesirable

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- **The gender** of the MPs should be *ignored* and **the inclusiveness thing** should be done *later* → enhancing gender diversity in cabinet (i.e. selecting more women) = undesirable
- *ignore*/*go for* and *first*/*later* → strong impression of opposition between appointing women ministers and selecting those with **merit** and **the most capable**

‘Male-as-norm’

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- **the most capable** could refer to MPs of any sex
- Only 3 women ministers needed to fill quota → Serious reservations about women’s political calibre
- The assertion implies that the women lack *experience and character*
- Overlooks the fact that many of the men MPs were new to governance

Neoliberal discourse of meritocracy makes rejecting gender-based reform appear moral

Meritocracy is ‘a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture … It proclaims greater equality of opportunity for more people than ever before’ and encourages us ‘to believe that if we try hard enough we can make it: that race or class or gender are not, on a fundamental level, significant barriers to success’ (Littler, 2018: 2)

Neoliberal discourse of meritocracy makes rejecting gender-based reform appear moral

- Within meritocratic discourse, competitive participation = moral obligation (Littler, 2018)
- In Malaysia, moralistic dimension of neoliberal meritocracy galvanised by decades of public dissatisfaction with race-based affirmative action, etc.
- Meritocracy is often construed as binary opposed to corruption and cronyism

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- These nominals carry a moral charge
- Their juxtaposition against **the gender** and **the inclusiveness thing** → gender quotas as morally questionable opportunism → delegitimising them
- Rejecting gender-based reform = a moral act, not a sexist one
- Quotas and affirmative action = regressive

Nation rebuilding as alibi for sexist beliefs

Malaysia is undergoing [recovery]. Put the capable and wise one first regardless the gender.

[what is more important is to save the country. no need to care if they are a man or woman, what is important is that they are truly great and qualified]

- Implicit objection to quota relies on assumption that there are not enough *capable, wise, great or qualified* women MPs to meet it
- Again, obfuscated by meritocratic discourse, triggered by these adjectives

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- Moral evaluation occurs with **instrumental rationalisation** for supporting meritocracy
- (De)legitimates practices by reference to goals, uses and effects (van Leeuwen, 2007)
- Constructed national interests provide compelling reasons for meritocracy → delegitimises gender quotas further

Zero-sum thinking: Addressing gender parity vs corruption & debt

You guys are not helping the situation by **putting pressure on the new govt**. They have major issues to deal with. Give them time to sort things out. Relax and calm down. Your voices will be heard, but now is definitely not the time.

- Verb phrase → conventional implicature that **pressuring the govt** for 30% women ministers = undesirable
- Obscures the problem that women are not valued as leaders

‘Women’s political leadership as inessential’

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- Textual cue to views on abuse of political power AND demand for gender-equal political participation
- Jeffries’s (2010) notion of auto-evocation
- Invokes major/trivial opposition
- Having more women leaders = inconsequential (women as followers, not leaders)
- Brushed aside

‘Gender equality has been achieved’

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- Modal verb – strong commitment to myth that women’s concerns will be adequately considered **(in this ‘new Malaysia’?)**

‘Gender equality has been achieved’

EARN your rights. Without [you] asking, cabinet placement will take place.

- Feminism is unnecessary
- Modal verb – strong belief in gender-equal Malaysia
- Assumes level playing field in politics **(in this ‘new Malaysia’?)**

‘Women can have it all if they work hard enough’

EARN your rights. Without [you] asking, cabinet placement will take place.

Equality is not a number. **We must [put ourselves forward] and show [our capabilities].** Is not for men to push us upfront my sister

- Places responsibility for change on the individual
- Reject collective solutions and government intervention
- **Old vs New Malaysia?**
- **Directives** interpellate women as enterprising subjects of capacity
- Obligational modality – neoliberal imperative to strive for achievement as compulsory

Summary of Findings

Patriarchal attitudes persist

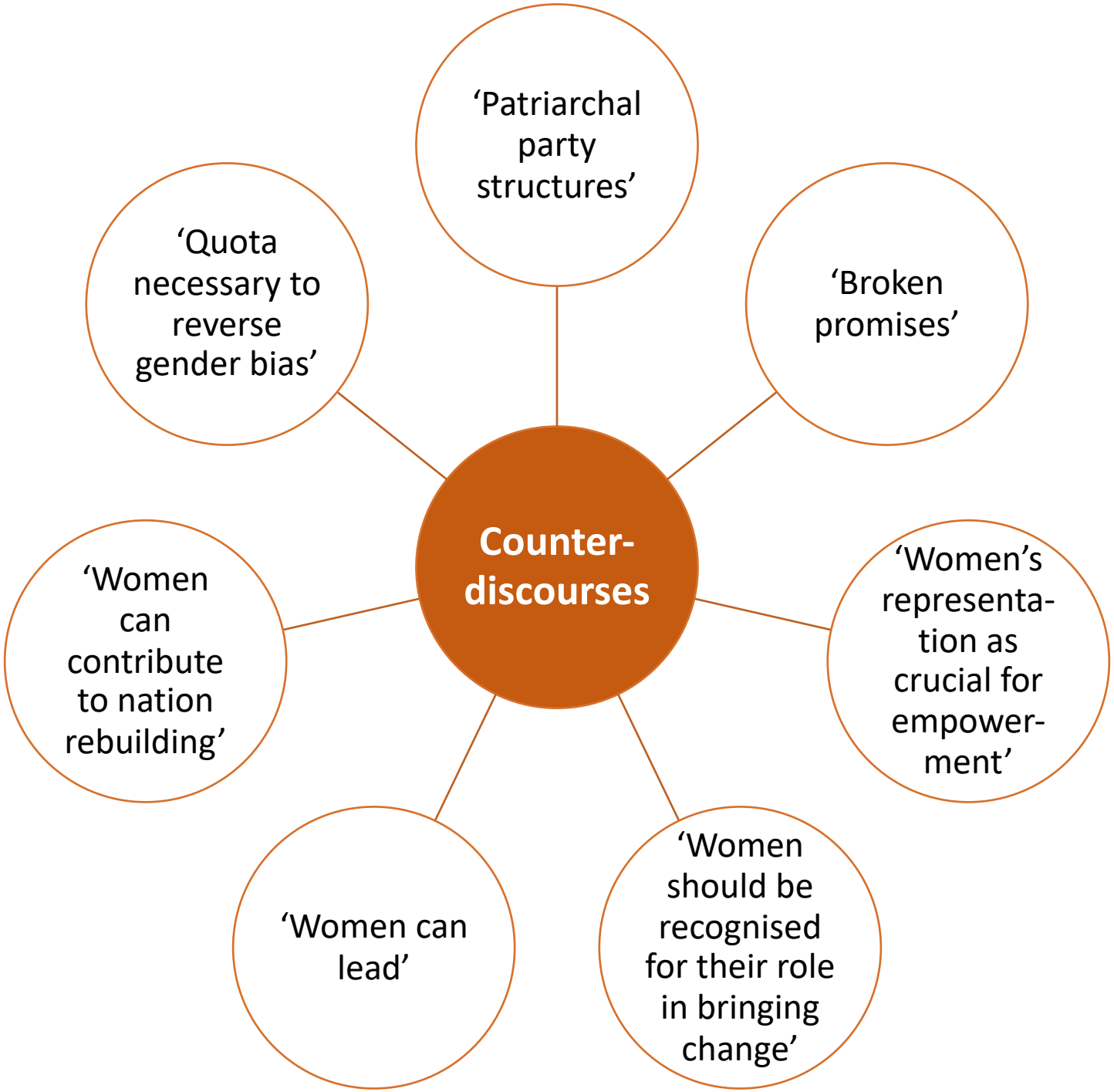
Neoliberal & postfeminist discourses → gender status quo appear moral & commonsensical

(Implicit) disavowal of sexism = key mechanism through which gender inequalities are preserved

What are the implications of these, moving forward?

Challenges for Political Organising for Women's Empowerment

- Collective pressure is crucial for gender-based reforms in Malaysia
- Challenges due to:
  - Resistance from what is believed to be a **moral position of national interest**,
  - Denial of structural power relations, and
  - Privatisation of issues of inequality


‘Patriarchal party structures’
‘Quota necessary to reverse gender bias’
‘Broken promises’
Counter-discourses
‘Women can contribute to nation rebuilding’
‘Women’s representa-tion as crucial for empower-ment’
‘Women can lead’
‘Women should be recognised for their role in bringing change’

Research on the Attraction of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

- To grasp their power and disrupt them when mobilising change, we need to attend to the affective dimensions of these ideologies and address questions of investment and desire (Gill, 2008)
- **Contextualised linguistic research** on how these ideologies achieve their effective governance

Research in Non-traditional Political Arenas

- Crucial to explore **how gendered power relations in politics is maintained through discursive means in informal political arenas**, e.g. social media
- Frequent reinforcement of discourses in the online discussions not only reflects, but mystifies patriarchal power arrangements in political life

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Thank You!