

Challenges for Women in Political Parties in Malaysia and Acceleration Strategies to Leadership in Politics





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By Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan

Abstract

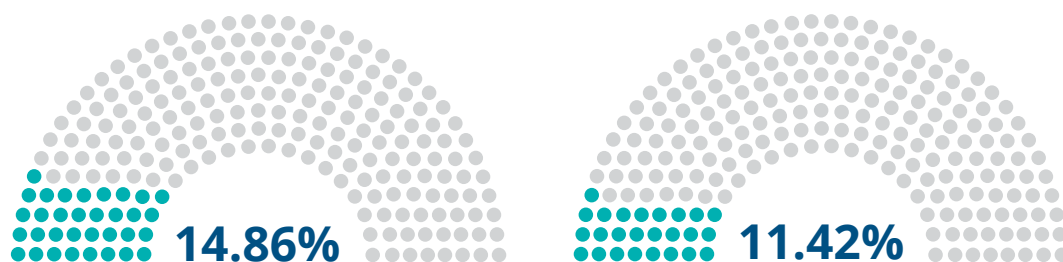
This paper discusses the challenges faced by women in political parties in Malaysia. A nationwide study revealed that gender roles, male dominance, gender stereotyping, women's agency, intersectionality of age and gender, and political efficacy in the parties have emerged as significant challenges to women in political parties, especially those in (or who aspire to be in) leadership positions. On the one hand, the challenges presently faced by women are not new – they are very similar to the challenges women faced in the earlier periods of Malaysian history, which gives us an insight as to why politics continues to display the biggest gender gap in the country. The most dominant challenges originate from the gendered role of women in the private sphere (family) and the societal expectations on them as mothers, wives and caretakers. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be leaders in the public domain (politics). These gendered roles of men and women have significantly impacted and shaped politics, serving to reinforce male domination in politics and perpetuating gender inequalities in political parties. Data in this study is collected from 109 female respondents from 20 political parties nationwide (in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak), as well as in-depth interviews with 19 selected women leaders holding various positions.

The paper proposes three main strategies to accelerate women leadership in politics, namely, amendment and/or introduction of new legislation, enhancing of women's agency and strengthening the structure and policies of political parties. Finally, the study concludes that there is a need for political and legal commitment from the government to introduce legislation which will create an impetus for political parties to break the barriers that challenge the institution of gender equality practices and norms. Concerted efforts need to be taken so the country does not lose out to the benefits brought about by women leadership.

The Numerical Reality

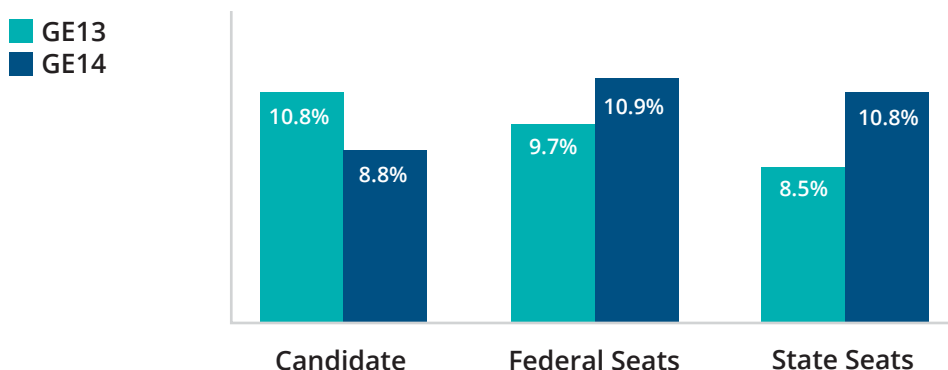
Participation and leadership of women in politics are mandatory for many reasons. The most apparent one is that women, who constitute half of the global and national population, are greatly under-represented. In fact, Political Empowerment has appeared as the domain with the biggest gap in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 (GGGI) compared to three other main domains: Economic Participation and Opportunity; Educational Attainment; and Health and Survival. The World Economic Forum (WEF) states that the pandemic has impacted women more severely than men, partially re-opening gaps that had already been closed. Based on the present trajectory, the gender gap in the Political Empowerment domain will take 135.6 years to close (World Economic Forum, 2022:5). Similar trends can be seen in the Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) 2020 where the Political Empowerment score of 0.108 showed the biggest gap among the four domains measured, followed by Economic Participation (0.717) and Health Survival (0.958). Gender parity is achieved in Educational Attainment (1.053) (DOSM, 2021).

At the beginning of 2022, the number of women in the Malaysian legislature constituted only



in the lower and upper houses, respectively.

The number is equally marginal in the state legislatures, **where only 11.57 percent are women in all 14 states assemblies combined** (Ahmad Zakuan, 2022). The number of women election candidates is still relatively low despite the increases seen in previous general elections. In the 2018 14th General Election (GE14), 252 women (10.8 percent) contested out of 2,333 candidates, an increase compared to 168 (8.8 percent) out of 1,900 candidates in the 13th General Election (GE13). There was also an increase in the number of women candidates in federal seats, from 9.7 percent in GE13 to 10.9 percent in GE14. State seats increased to 10.8 percent in GE14 from 8.5 percent in GE13 (Yeong 2018).



More recent state by-elections in Malacca (2021) and Johor (early 2022) witnessed the rise of women contesting. The number, however, is still far lower than men – 16 women out of 112 candidates contested in Malacca, with only five of them winning seats (News Straits Times, 11 November 2021). In terms of political parties, Perikatan Nasional (PN) fielded the highest number of women (6 candidates), followed by Barisan Nasional (BN) (5 candidates), Pakatan Harapan (PH) (4 candidates) and PUTRA (1 candidate) (Malaysianow, 14 Nov 2021). The Johor election saw 37 women and 202 men contesting, recording an increase from the 28 women candidates in GE14. BN fielded the largest number of women candidates in the Johor election (13 candidates), followed by Perikatan Nasional (6), Pejuang (2), PKR (3) and MUDA (2) (Bernama, 26 Feb 2022; Daily Express, 27 Feb 2022). Out of the 37 women candidates, 15 won seats in the election: 9 from BN, 4 from PN, 1 from PN and Muda respectively (Bacalah Malaysia Team, 13 March 2022). The two state by-elections combined recorded a mere 15.09% women (out of 351 candidates), from which only 20 women won. Although an increase can be seen, the number of women contesting is still low, and the number of women winning seats in the election is even lower.

Political parties are the foundation and the main players in politics. They exercise control over the selection and nomination of candidates, the fielding of candidates in safe or marginal seats, and are generally the gatekeepers to elected positions. Political parties thus have the prerogative in deciding the inclusion or exclusion of women and other under-represented groups (Dahlerup and Leyenaar, 2013).

Previous Studies On Women In Politics In Malaysia

Most studies on women in politics in Malaysia have focused on problems hindering women's active participation in politics. Studies in the late twentieth century have revealed that culture and religion present barriers to women's involvement in politics (Ariffin, 1992, 1995; Ahmad, 1994; Chu, 1994). Other obstacles included women's roles as family caretakers and being confined to the domestic sphere (Ariffin, 1992; Kew, 1993), political structures, political financing, and lack of self-confidence (Ramli, 1999).

More recent studies reveal similar findings. Welsh (2019) mentions that highly ethnicised and conservative politics have intensified and reinforced the marginalisation of efforts to stand up for women. This scenario is further heightened by a political environment that is more favourable to men. Other impediments include socioreligious factors (Subramaniam, 2000), financial resources (Ng, 2010; Yusoff et al., 2016; Saidon et al., 2017), lack of family-friendly culture in politics, individualistic/personal dislike of "dirtiness" in politics, lack of transparency in party nomination processes, as well as decision-making on the allocation of winnable seats (Ahmad Zakuan and Azmi, 2017; Izharuddin, 2019).

Some previous studies focused on strategies to encourage women's participation and representation in politics; identifying various approaches that should be employed including cooperation with women's associations and focusing on women voters (Ramli and Hassan, 2009; Beng Hui and Ng, 2006), or partnering with formal state actors (Mohamad, 2018) to create an integrated network supporting women politicians, which will allow them to continue staying in power. Other strategies include making reforms to political party structures, establishing quotas for a minimum number of women in parliament, and implementing a proportional representation (PR) electoral system (Ramli and Hassan, 2009; Yusoff et al., 2016; Izharuddin, 2019; Sukhani, 2020).

However, there has been no recent study examining barriers to women's political participation and empowerment. This paper thus intends to take up the existing discussions on barriers to women's participation and empowerment in politics. It aims to present itself as the latest study (timeliness), and one with nationwide coverage (extensive). A study of such intent and coverage is highly significant to understand the lived realities of women in the political parties as, in comparison to other domains, women's political empowerment continues to show the biggest gender gap. Most pertinent is that this persistent under-representation of women in political institutions, such as in parliament where vital decisions are taken, impacts societies and the country, making it very significant for researchers and policy-makers to understand the causes of the gender gap in politics.

The researcher is highly grateful to the respondents who willingly shared their inputs and provided valuable opportunities for the researcher to understand the realities of women empowerment in political parties. This paper is part of a larger study on the empowerment of women in the political parties and political offices in Malaysia. The focus of this paper is to examine the challenges faced by women in their respective political parties as well as politics in general, and identify strategies that can accelerate their leadership in politics. The study is crucial as political parties remain as the main feeder for women's formal political representation and is a key element in bridging the widening political gender gap.

Methodology

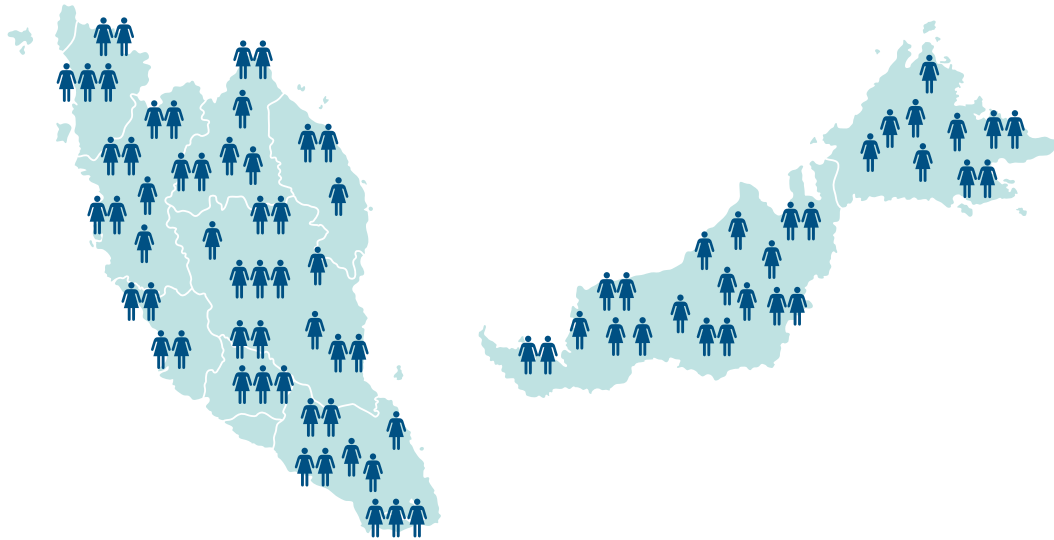
This study comprises two main components of data collection: a set of survey questions and in-depth interviews with selected women political leaders from various political parties.

SURVEY

A set of questionnaires was produced and guided by the research objectives. It consisted of several parts: Part 1, Demographic; Part 2, Barriers and Challenges; Part 3, Strategy and Mechanism; and Part 4, Capacity Building.

The survey was conducted online and questionnaires were distributed to women members and leaders in various position in political parties nationwide. It was distributed for a period of five weeks (from 4 February to 10 March 2022), and predominantly employed two main strategies. First, distribution through current women leaders who shared it with the female members in the respective parties. These women leaders were approached from public information available on their websites or Facebook pages, the researcher's existing network, via introduction by other women leaders, and introductions from the network of women leaders in NGOs. The second approach was appointing research assistants based in different states in Malaysia tasked with approaching the women members and/or leaders from any political parties in their areas and who were willing to answer the questionnaires.

Within this short period of time, the study successfully garnered significant responses from 109 women politicians from 20 political parties nationwide – Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. The details of all respondents and parties remain anonymous in the discussions of this paper.



IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

For the qualitative aspect of this research, women leaders from major political parties were contacted to participate in the interviews. Of all those contacted, 19 agreed to participate. The in-depth interviews were conducted from January until March 2022, either face-to-face or online. The names of the interviewees and their respective parties remain anonymous.

The in-depth interviews aimed to take a deeper dive in understanding the barriers and challenges experienced by women in the political parties. The women were asked to share their own experiences as well as their observations on other women in their respective parties. Suggestions on strategies and mechanisms to empower women in the political parties and politics in general were also discussed.

The study is intended to be anonymous and all efforts have been made to ensure anonymity. The names used in reference to respondents are fictitious to avoid identification.

Findings And Discussions

The data collection findings (from both survey and in-depth interviews) reveal several challenges faced by the women in the political parties.

CHALLENGE 1: GENDER ROLES

Being a mother and a wife appears to be the most pronounced challenge to (many or the majority of) women's active participation in politics. The researcher found this as the most pronounced challenge based on the sharing by the women politicians interviewed in this study, and as well as reflections of other women's experiences. Irrespective of political parties and ethnic groups, women leaders shared that their roles as mothers and wives emerged as the biggest challenge to party work, activities and even their political ambitions.



The challenges are even greater in situations where the child(ren) are younger, they are young mothers or single parents, and they do not have a strong support system.

In addition to their roles as mothers and wives, women who have stable careers often find balancing between work, family and politics very challenging. All these circumstances have caused many women in politics, especially those in leadership positions, to choose between their priorities – where their decisions depend on their respective situations. Some choose to stay in politics but are not active; some sacrifice family-time; some secure part-time employment or pass up bigger opportunities and career promotions to focus on politics. A few women resigned from their careers for the sake of politics.

These gender roles (as mothers and wives) have resulted in a huge dilemma for these women, forcing them to choose and decide their priorities. Their own expectations, combined with the societal expectation of seeing them as mothers and wives first, become a significant challenge towards achieving their political ambitions. It can be inferred from these findings that the expected role of women is still predominantly centred around taking care of families and domestic responsibilities. The gendered traditional roles are still strong and they still persist despite the change in family dynamics where women are now involved in the formal (and informal) employment sector or the public domain. These gendered roles in the family results in heavy workloads and commitments for women. Thus, striking a balance between family and career could deter them from actively pursuing their political ambitions.

This reality is reflected in several excerpts from the interviews with women leaders in political parties. One of the respondents shared her and her counterparts' dilemma between care responsibilities and politics. She explains:

“

I cannot deny that on some days, I would very much prefer just being home with my kids. Because I do feel guilty. You know, I hardly have time for them, especially during campaigns. They can go for one week without seeing the mother. But that's the issue of why we lack **women** representatives in politics. At the end of the day, those who sacrifice is not us - it's the kid's. No mother would want the kids to feel that their mother is absent.”
(Fatimah)



Another respondent shared that the demands to care for the children required her to decide between family or politics. She chose to prioritise her family but still tries her best to participate in politics. She explained:

“

If you are married, and you don't have kids yet, I think that lessens the problem... when you have kids, to me, politics is about sacrifice. If you want to be really clean, to perform, it will take a lot of time. People at my age, 28 are just starting to have kids...it's a challenge. So, I have to make a choice. Basically, if I want to perform in politics, I will achieve less in my personal life, unless I have helpers or private assistants. But I don't have all that and it's hard. If you are single, then, it's still ok. But, if you have kids, it will affect the children. To me, it's a challenge. It takes your family time.” (Amalina)



Familial responsibilities has caused political parties to lose women participation, especially young women who have great potential to be part of the women leadership and are able to contribute substantially to the party. As one respondent explains:



"We find it the most challenging if it's a female member."



"You know, having small children means that the environment itself has to allow her to raise the son or daughter."

"Those with children need some help, if they don't have that kind of help, then we will lose some really good members, unfortunately."



"When they are asked to make a decision involving family matters, that's when we have trouble retaining members - it is not because they are not good - they are really, really good."

"However, for the ladies... a lot of them, you know, they will have to say, "Oh, I need to leave the meeting, I need to go pick up my son," or during weekends for instance "... I can't do this because my son has this..."

"There is an emergency at my son's school, I need to leave now"



"It's challenging. Comparing men and women on this point, I still see the issue of women struggling with home commitments, family commitments." (Mistika)



In this survey, more than 50 percent of the women, across each age group, agree that there is a lack of an enabling environment for women to be involved in programmes of political parties held late at night or on weekends (see Table 1). This has emerged as a deterrent for the active participation of women in politics.

Societal expectations remain strong in the system where members in the political parties, including the women members, expect their leaders to show exemplary roles in managing their families and domestic responsibilities. Similar expectations are there from the voters, which merits them as good leaders. This family-oriented expectation is high towards all politicians but is higher for women leaders.

Based on the study's interviews, this expectation has been highlighted as a key challenge to women leaders as the expectation to perform at their best is higher. Such expectation on women leaders goes beyond their party work and encompasses their personal lives, including on how they manage their families. The success of managing families is often being used as a measure of their competence as leaders and hence, is a qualifying factor. One of the respondents shared her experiences and observations when she was appointed as one of the leaders in her party. She narrates:



I found out that as a young mother and a person newly involved in the political field, I needed to really know how to balance my time between family and involvement in politics. Because not only my family needed my attention, but also people who depend on me and management for the political party. For me, when you are in a higher position in the party, people definitely want to know about my family and if my family isn't what they expect, they might judge the way I handle the party's leadership position. I understand that they might end up questioning my ability to lead them too." (Jasmin)



The issue of societal expectations for women to care for families and domestic responsibilities emerges as a challenge to women leaders is also reflected in other studies. Ahu Sumbas (2019) who studied challenges faced by the women mayors in Turkey reveals the dynamics of the local politics do not allow women "to neglect, transform and share family responsibilities and nursing roles, as people would not be able to see them as 'the mother of their town'". In fact, families and communities observe their women politicians closely by scrutinizing how they handle both politics and domestic responsibilities. Sumbas argues that the time and energy needed to participate in politics are critical resources for women, at the same time, the social cost of politics for women is also higher than for their male counterparts.

Bawa and Sanyare's (2013) study on women participation and representation in politics in Ghana reveal that the prevailing socio-cultural discrimination system has resulted in women not treated as equally capable as their male counterparts. This alludes to gendered public and private spheres, which, for the male domain is regarded as macro while for women, as micro and private. In Sweden, a study by Seva and Oun (2019) revealed that women politicians seek to balance work and family lives by working part-time in politics or sharing household responsibilities with their spouse, due to the fact that they feel the work-family conflict more than men. Shedova (2005) narrates that women politicians still perform the lion's share of domestic tasks, such as cooking, housekeeping and most importantly, child rearing, which can serve as a powerful obstacle to their political involvement.

Family and care responsibilities are mostly mentioned as the main barriers to women's active political participation in this study. Not only do they pose a barrier to active political participation; their impact is also felt in other sectors. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the hours women spend in unpaid jobs, such as household chores and care work, is much higher than that of men universally. In Asia and the Pacific, the daily average unpaid care work done by women is four times more than that done by men. Women in Japan spend five times more on unpaid care work than Japanese men, while in some countries, the number is up to 11 times more. The heavy burden of unpaid care work directly hinders women from fully participating in paid jobs or in the labour force; thus widening the gender pay gap. In many cultures, unconscious social bias leads to unequal care work in society. Women are expected to take on more responsibility in care work and housework (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021: 6).

It can be seen that women politicians are often framed within the gendered roles as "mothers" and "housewives", and are expected to fulfil these responsibilities first, and their ambitions (such as in politics or be recognised as effective leaders), second.

CHALLENGE 2: MALE DOMINANCE

Male dominance appears as one of the major challenges faced by the women in political parties.



The study's survey showed an overwhelming percentage of male dominance in the parties' decision-making from respondents across all age groups. Respondents were asked to best describe their experiences and their observations in the parties based on the statement given. The data was tabulated based on different age groups as show in the table below to gauge the different experiences and observations of women across age groups in their political parties.

STATEMENT	ALL AGES	< 30 YEARS	31-40 YEARS OLD	41-50 YEARS OLD	> 50 YEARS OLD
Women tend to prepare food, take meeting minutes and clean party premises	61.1%	68%	69.7%	77.7%	55.5%
Women are perceived as less capable	46.6%	52%	51.5%	61.1%	51.8%
Men are more qualified to be leaders	56.3%	64%	57.6%	66.7%	62.9%
Less significant positions are given to women	47.6%	48%	54.59%	50%	59.2%
Decision-making is controlled by men	76.6%	87.9%	86.8%	78.8%	90.4%
There is an unwillingness to promote women as leaders	55.3%	56%	57.6%	72.2%	55.5%
Lack of enabling environment for women to be involved in party programmes	52.5%	52%	54.5%	55.6%	55.5%

TABLE 1: DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS IN YOUR RESPECTIVE POLITICAL PARTY (PERCENTAGE = STRONGLY AGREE AND AGREE)

These findings show that male domination persists and gendered roles are still prevalent. The most striking and prevailing response, across political parties and age groups, is that the decision-making process in the parties is still predominantly controlled by men. More than half of the respondents revealed that parties are still reluctant to promote women to leadership positions. They also revealed that women across all age groups are still expected to play traditional gendered roles in parties such as preparing food for meetings and events, taking meeting minutes, and cleaning party premises. They are also being pigeonholed to perform specific roles and tasks, and this finding is echoed in conversations with women leaders in different political parties:

FATIMAH ASKS:



“

Why does all of this have to be done by just the women? Jobs like going to orphanages, why is it just the women who do this? But then again, the women themselves don't think it is a problem, they just think that's just how things are being done.”

FATIMAH STATES:

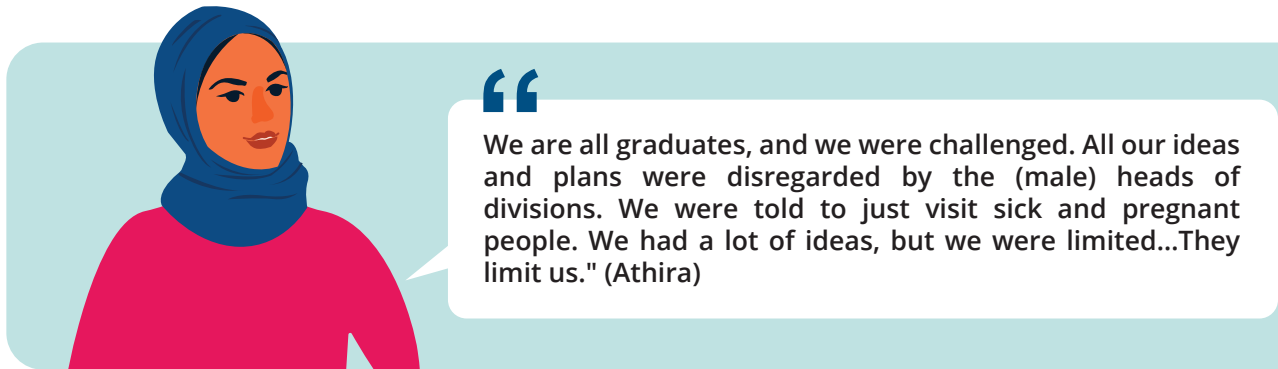


“

We become the people who arrange files and clean the offices for everyone else. That's how people see us, they see us as cleaners.”

The findings suggest that the male dominance is still a reality in parties. The dominance has adversely impacted women's leadership and decision-making power in these parties. The dominance is also reflected in the parties' practices and values in the tasks that women perform in the parties. Highly-skilled and educated women are seen as threats to men in the parties; to extent that some women are expected (or forced) to follow male leaders.

REFLECTING THIS POINT, A WOMAN LEADER STATES:



The views (from the interviews) are also consistent with the views shared by the respondents in the survey through the qualitative inputs. These are some of the captured responses:

“Men are not happy to see women more active and advanced”

“Men perceive women as their competitors, not strategic partners”

“Not giving many opportunities to women....”

“Women are not given the opportunity to prove their abilities”

“Women are made to believe that they are weak and need guidance from men to govern”

TABLE 2: PLEASE STATE ANY OTHER CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES

The domination of men in party leadership at various levels is a lived reality in the political parties, and one that persists. Male domination has caused various impacts, including lack of women in party leadership and provision of less significant positions for women in the parties. Dahlerup and Leyenaar (2013) labelled this stern type of male dominance, as “male monopoly” characterised by the de facto exclusion of women from most political positions and issue areas. They also stated that it is a reminder that male dominance, in all its aspects, has not disappeared.

Furthermore, to grasp changes over time, they argued for the need for conceptual clarification, and introduced dimensions of what encapsulates male-dominated politics. The six dimensions are:

The infographic is set against a light teal background and contains six distinct sections, each with an icon and a text block:

- Representation:** An icon of a woman at a podium. Text: "Representation: Women's numerical under-representation in elected assemblies".
- Politics as a workplace:** An icon of three people in business attire. Text: "Politics as a workplace: Male-coded norms and practices in elected assemblies".
- Vertical gender segregation:** An icon of a man and a woman with briefcases. Text: "Vertical gender segregation: Unequal gender distribution of positions in political hierarchies".
- Horizontal gender segregation:** An icon of a woman at a door labeled "MEN ONLY". Text: "Horizontal gender segregation: Limited access for women to a range of portfolios and committees".
- Discourses and framing:** An icon of two people holding signs that say "STRONG" and "EMOTIONAL". Text: "Discourses and framing: Gendered perceptions of politicians".
- Public policy:** An icon of a seesaw with a male symbol on the high side and a female symbol on the low side. Text: "Public policy: Policies biased in favour of men – no concern for gender equality".

The culture of male domination has caused a great loss to women – a lower number of women are nominated to contest in elections as the party leaderships hold the view that men have a higher chance of winning in the elections compared to women, resulting in more men selected as candidates. In addition, the decision on the selection of candidates is usually done by a small circle of party committee members (predominantly male leaders) with the party president often having the final say. The judgments and decisions with regard to candidate selection is heavily based on male perspectives and experiences, and consequently, a small number of women are nominated to contest in the election. It is evident in the data stated earlier in this paper, that the number of women nominated in the elections in Malaysia are far lower than men's.

Danial Abdullah (2022) reiterates that candidate selection by the leadership of the party takes several factors into consideration including racial population, background, and the ability of the candidate to win the constituency seat. Ahmad Zakuan and Azmi (2017) argue that getting women nominated has become challenging as the process of nomination lacks transparency and the notion of “winnable” candidate rests on the judgment of the top party leadership. Baer (1993) commenting on Kendrigan’s assessment on the failure of the parties [to nominate women] cannot be attributed to the lack of qualified women candidates. Qualifications, measured in terms of age, occupation, education, training, and interest, show that there are far more qualified women available to be nominated. The only factor that can explain why there is a lower number of women nominated by their political parties is discrimination.

CHALLENGE 3: GENDER STEREOTYPING


Gender stereotyping also appears as a significant challenge to women’s empowerment in politics and it manifests in several ways. First, the gendered roles of women in the families have been contextualised in the party’s structure and roles. As a result of this, women are less likely to be perceived as capable leaders. They are seen as emotional, and are often not entrusted with the leadership roles. From the survey, more than half of the respondents, across age groups, agreed that women are perceived as less capable and more emotional.

STATEMENT	ALL AGES	< 30 YEARS	31-40 YEARS OLD	41-50 YEARS OLD	> 50 YEARS OLD
Women are perceived as less capable and more emotional leaders	46.6%	52%	51.5%	61.1%	51.8%

TABLE 3: DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS IN YOUR RESPECTIVE POLITICAL PARTIES (PERCENTAGE = STRONGLY AGREE AND AGREE)

This stereotyping has been normalised through the acceptance of male dominance in the parties – where regardless of their performance, men are perceived as leaders and women as followers. Women are applauded as the main engine in ensuring the victory of their parties in elections; they are often tasked with canvassing votes, cleaning up voter lists, campaigning to ensure their candidates win (of which majority are men). Women also make sure the basic needs of the crew at election campaign centres are adequately fulfilled. These roles typically stereotype women as party workers and are consequently less likely to be considered to contest in elections.

Secondly, another aspect of gender stereotyping revealed by this study is that matters related to women are likely to be delegated to women leaders to act upon, even if the matter is within the jurisdiction of a male leader or the party as a whole. This stereotyping has led men, particularly those in leadership positions, to ignore or to take lightly women-related issues and matters, including the issue of lack of women leadership in the parties. It thus becomes the sole duty of women leaders to push for women leadership. In the interview, one of the women leaders explains;

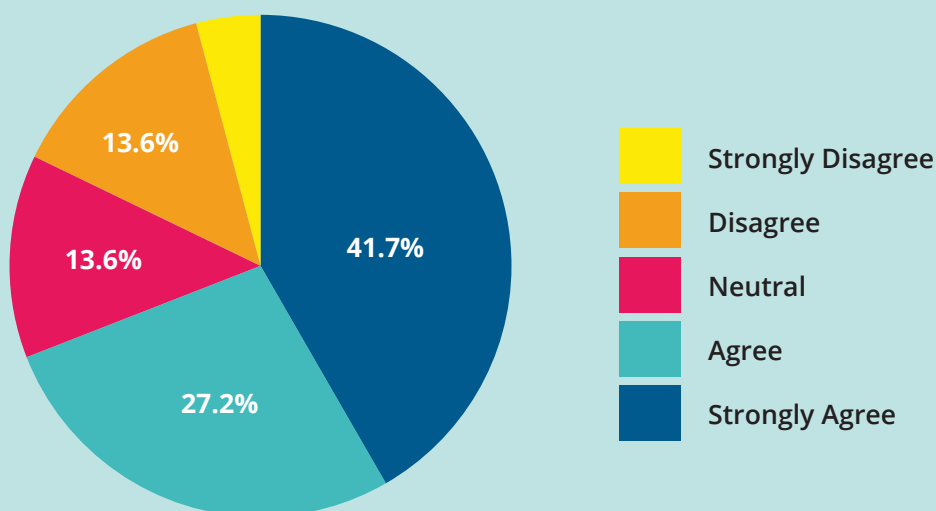


“ It's always left to women leaders to address these issues. It's huge, isn't this your party policy? Isn't this what the whole party should do? As women in politics, if you are elected as MP or as ADUN (State Assemblywoman), you must do all the jobs a male ADUN does, then you must take care of women issues too. So whenever, until now, when other service centres see cases of domestic violence; they will tell them to refer to me or another **women** representative, or all the women ADUNs. Even if there is a case, a woman, she had a bank loan problem, it is also referred to me, just because she's a woman.” (Ling)

Women-related concerns have been treated as “women’s issues only” as opposed to being seen as human rights, national, local, or even party issues. As a result, women-related concerns do not effectively become mainstream, nor do they become part of the party's main agenda. Evidently, as seen in Illustration 1 below, gender equality is not a priority in the respective political parties of the study's respondents. The study also revealed that, to avoid backlash from the male members in the party, women leaders generally tend to use gender neutral language when proposing programmes in the party. This approach seemingly increases the acceptance of the proposed programmes by (male) party members. She said:



I approach it in a way that we are fighting on the same issue, nothing to do with gender, but eventually getting more females involved in the issue.” (Fatimah)



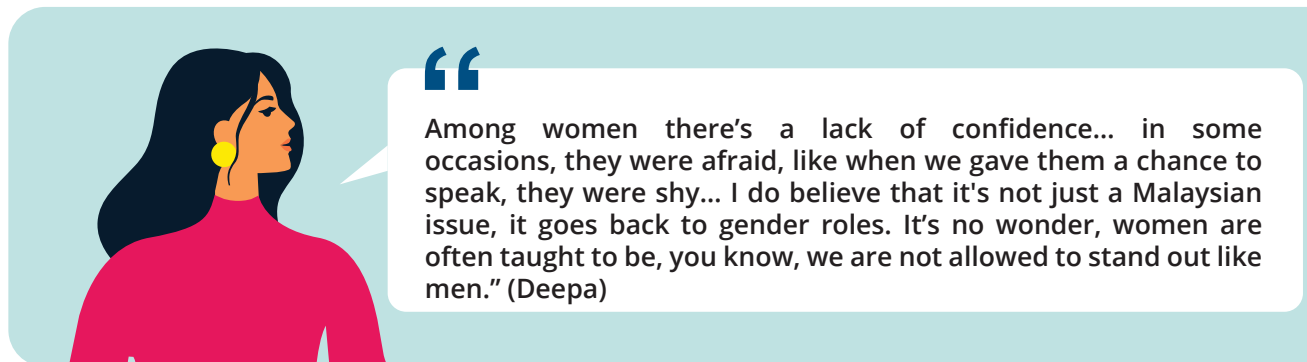
GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES

ILLUSTRATION 1. ABSENCE OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY IN THE POLITICAL PARTY

CHALLENGE 4: WOMEN'S AGENCY

Women's agency refers to the ability to define one's goals and act on them (Kabeer, 1999) and this can, depending on the context, include economic, social, and different political actions (Sen, 1999). Agency can also be exercised at the individual, household, and community levels (Donald et al., 2020). Donald et al. (2020) explains that three key dimensions are needed to fully capture individual agency. First, an individual needs to define goals that are aligned with their values. This refers to a person's ability to set clear goals, i.e., individuals are able to choose their goal – regardless of whether it is made on their own volition, or influenced by others, or even defined by the social norms of their environment. Second, individuals need to perceive a sense of control and ability. This means that he/she believes that they are able and in control to initiate actions to achieve the goals. The third dimension is that individuals need to act on their goals, referring to the ability of the individual to work on those set goals. While the first two dimensions are more internal, the latter dimension is external and is influenced by gender relations.

From this study, women's agency appears as one of the challenges in women leadership because women tend to be described as having less confidence in speaking out their minds and tend to prefer not to articulate their ideas in public, especially in a majority male audience. This was found to be quite common as shared by several women leaders in the interviews, as well as by the survey respondents in this study. Adeline reveals that women in her party do not really speak out due to several reasons including a) Malaysian women's nature, which denotes expectations of speaking politely and being less vocal; and b) being surrounded by a male-dominated environment seems to have caused women to doubt themselves. This is reiterated by another woman leader in another party, who states:



These points were also reflected by respondents in the survey. Table 4 shows some of their excerpts.

TABLE 4: PLEASE STATE ANY OTHER CHALLENGES WOMEN FACED IN POLITICAL PARTIES

<i>Lack of confidence among women</i>
<i>Women do not dare to talk and share</i>
<i>Women are not confident with their own capability and ability</i>

Besides a lack of confidence, it is also revealed that 43.7% of the respondents in this study affirmed that lack of political literacy and a further 46.6% of the respondents agreed that lack of skills among women in politics also deter them from being in leadership roles. These attributes can be related to the dimensions of women’s agency – on their abilities to reach their goals.

Another important finding that can be linked to women’s agency is a lack of solidarity among the women members in the parties. The interviews with women leaders brought to the fore that a challenge for women to advance in leadership posts or higher ranks is due to the lack of support from other women in the party, where some women even prefer to support men as their leaders instead of fellow women. This lack of solidarity among women impacts on the ability and success of women to rise in leadership and decision-making positions. This can be associated with the third dimension of women’s agency, which relates to external factors such as gender relations and political efficacy of women members.

TABLE 5: DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS IN YOUR RESPECTIVE POLITICAL PARTIES

STATEMENT	STRONGLY DISAGREE & DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	STRONGLY AGREE & AGREE
There is lack of solidarity among women	17.5%	26.2%	56.3%

CHALLENGE 5: PARTY STRUCTURE AND INTERSECTION OF AGE AND GENDER

Party structure is revealed as another challenge to women in political parties. One aspect in particular was mentioned – the transition from the party’s youth wing to the women’s wing. The impact of transition may not be considered as significant by political parties, but it impacts the continuity of women leadership in the parties. A leadership vacuum is triggered when the present leader(s) of the youth wings is (are) in transition to the women’s wing due to the age limit (of the youth wing). In cases where there is no available pool of talent among themselves, or lack of proper succession planning, the transition leaves the youth post(s) to less experienced members. This point was raised by two young women leaders when explaining their leadership transition experiences (from the youth to women’s wing) which caused a leadership vacuum in the youth wing. Gita explains that even though she has moved to the women’s wing, she still needed to support the youth wing from time to time because there was no capable person to lead. Another young woman leader shares:



The limitation of age affected us. Leadership was not present because there are not enough quality people taking part... As for me, when I started becoming more involved in politics, I was 28, I had not married yet, so I could give my commitment and I could develop my skills and connections. However, once we reach our 30s and have the skills already, after a while we have to jump to the women's wing, and there won't be leaders in the female youth wing...then the women youth have no one to lead them. The majority of them are fragile and afraid to speak up." (Adeline)



Women empowerment is also affected by the hierarchical structure of the party, and the unwillingness of young women leaders to challenge this structure, which to a certain degree restricts their potential to grow and slows down their progress towards taking up party leadership positions. Two young women leaders from the same party, explain:



I think our party's structure is to educate the members to start at the bottom and work their way up. So, there is a process which is needed - it's like growing up; we are babies, toddlers, children, and teenagers in a process. Some people take a long time to be an MP but some people take a less. That is the beauty of being in our party. We prepare people to blossom into a beautiful flower that can be a party asset." (Awatif & Puteri)



Intersectionality issues in the parties such as age and gender have appeared as a challenge to young(er) women in politics. Age has emerged as a challenge to young(er) women politicians affecting their ability to get space, visibility, and opportunities in the leadership posts and circle. This is aggravated with party hierarchical structure, which to a certain extent, seems to be less receptive to the ambitions and activism of young members.



I don't agree that the party gives visibility and space for the youth, because as a young person, when we want to go into the organisational structure, they would look at us, and ask us "how old are you?". Oh, you are in your 20s, only a "chick" (*anak ayam*), no need to bother with her ideas, we just focus on our own. That is actually a barrier to young persons to voice out or share their ideas. I think in the party, young people need to prove themselves first in order to be accepted." (Priya)



This is aligned with the sharing of another young woman leader from another political party, who confessed that she experiences discrimination because of her age. She said:



I do not feel discriminated as a woman but get discriminated for being young." (Jaling)

Similarly, another young woman leader shares that her gender and age pose a challenge to her leadership in politics. She explained:



If we are a little younger, we are maybe discriminated more. In politics, there is also gender discrimination, (young) men will be closer to the boss, he is happy to talk, eat, drink with the boss. He can speak first to the boss as compared to me, and this is similar to my situation where I am the only female among the whole group. It's very common: men with their ego. If we are younger in age, we might be more discriminated." (Masooma)

CHALLENGE 6: LACK OF POLITICAL EFFICACY AMONG WOMEN MEMBERS

Political efficacy refers to the “feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process. It has two dimensions: internal efficacy, or people’s self-perception of their capability to understand and participate in political processes, and external efficacy, which is their feeling of having a say in what governments do” (OECD, 2021: 208).

Findings in this study reveal that nearly half of the respondents agree that lack of political literacy is among the challenges for women in politics. It is also revealed by several responses in the survey that women, irrespective of age, lack knowledge related to politics and are not alert the economic and political situation in the country. Women’s educational levels also play a role in advancing their political parties’ growth and direction. These conditions have led to lower understanding on politics among women and hence, limit their ability to participate substantively in more critical decision-making roles in the parties. The level of political literacy, as a result, has affected women’s level of political efficacy.

	STRONGLY DISAGREE & DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	STRONGLY AGREE & AGREE
Lack of political literacy	31 (30.1%)	27 (26.2%)	45 (43.7%)

TABLE 6. DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS IN YOUR POLITICAL PARTIES

Lack of political efficacy results in less interest among political party members in the current or future situation of the country, and even that of their own parties. Members also do not feel the urge to contribute towards achieving the objectives of their parties, to be involved in setting agendas for the benefit of their community, country, or even the party. While joining a political party can be considered as active political participation, joining a party devoid of having a mission or objective does not bring any benefit to the party. One woman party leader revealed that it is not easy to recruit female members, and those who join the party mostly do so due to the influence of their friends or simply to follow their spouses. This results in them not knowing the importance of political parties (or even politics in general), and they are unable to contribute substantially to the party. Athira explains:



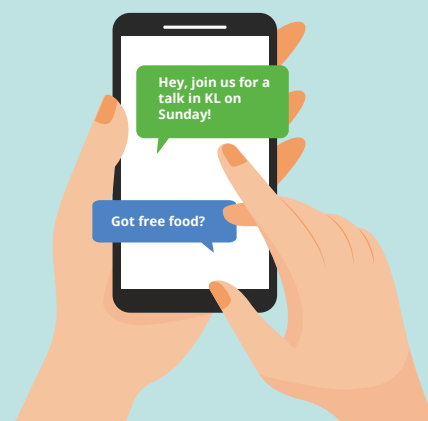
Regarding women, it's difficult to get them to join. They don't see the importance of political parties or they are too busy, especially during the PKP (Covid-19 movement control orders) where people prioritised their well-being as compared to politics."



"It's difficult to find members who are active. Most of them join because their friends or husbands joined. So, during meetings, they just come to fill the space but aren't active."



"Out of 30 people, maybe only seven are active. One challenge is that maybe our members are not professionals. So, to give them information, we must use simple language. When informing them on WhatsApp, we must be detailed. We have to be simple otherwise they don't understand. When we want to call people to join programmes, we have to make the programmes interesting."



"People aren't interested in listening to just lectures – they won't come. There are also many parties in Malaysia which also makes people confused. They don't know what party to choose. They think only voting is important. They don't know who to vote for. Even the ones inside our party."



"So, we have to let people know our strengths and our abilities. It takes a lot of time to assemble them and get a team that's high in quality and that's active".

The lack of political efficacy among women members in political parties could make them unaware of the importance of women in politics. Consequently, without the critical support and activism among women members, women leaders are less able to develop a strong synergy among women in their parties, impacting on the success and the effectiveness of women leadership and representation in politics.

Strategies and Mechanisms to Accelerate Women in Leadership and Decision-Making

Drawing from the challenges shared by the respondents, there are three main strategies to redress the challenges and accelerate women in the country's leadership and decision-making roles. The strategies include amending and/or introducing new legislation, enhancing women's agency, and strengthening party structure and policies.

AMENDMENT OR INTRODUCTION OF LEGISLATION

It is a fact that women's participation in politics at the decision-making level remains inhibited in Malaysia. The most practical and feasible measure would be amending the existing legislature or introducing new legislation to increase women's representation.

According to the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), an increasing number of countries are introducing various types of gender quotas for elections, and half of the countries of the world use some type of electoral quota in their parliament (Dahlerup et al 2014). Electoral gender quotas have been adopted in every region in the world – from Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, Mexico, and Rwanda. Remarkably, the diverse range of countries all have highly effective gender quotas which ensure near equal representation of men and women in their respective parliaments (Clayton, 2021). According to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), gender quota laws have produced positive results towards increasing women's political representation in the region (Organization of American States, 2011). As reported in 2017 by the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Organization of American States (OAS), the policy of gender parity applied to the electoral lists appeared to have yielded the best results in increasing the ratio of women law-makers elected to the lower houses in Congress. In fact, most of the countries that have passed gender parity laws show a significant increase in women representation, with many at unprecedented rates of over 40 percent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship Argentina, 2017). Hence, this shows that intervention through legislation has caused transformative changes in the amount of women representation in the legislature.

The Malaysian government, in 2004, had taken the step to increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making by the introduction of the Policy of 30% Women in the Decision-Making in the Public Sector. The decision was presented as a simple statement, without any detailed explanation or any strategic execution plan. The government announced:



The government agreed to implement a policy of at least 30 percent women at the decision-making level in the public sector. The government hopes that the private sector and government organisations implement the same policy.” (KPWKM, 2008)

It was then extended to the Corporate Sector in 2011, to be achieved by 2016 (Raja and Devadason, 2017). In terms of women's representation in corporate decision-making, more visible and stronger efforts have been taken. For example, the Budget 2022 announced that all public-listed companies (PLCs) are mandated to have at least one (1) female board director; from 1 September 2022 onwards for large-cap companies; and from 1 June 2023 for the remaining PLCs (Ministry of Finance 2021). More recently, just before the Budget 2022 was announced in October 2022, the Malaysian Prime Minister called for government-linked companies (GLCs) and government-linked investment companies (GLICs) to have at least 30 percent women membership in their board of directors, to be achieved prior to their respective annual general meetings in 2023 (The Merdeka Times, 15 August 2022). The recently (and half) tabled Budget 2023 included other items of relevance – the Securities Commission will introduce a special training programme to improve women's skills, identify and subsequently increase the number of women eligible to be appointed as board members (Ministry of Finance, 2022).

It can be seen that there are concrete actions taken to ensure the target of the 30 percent in corporate sector decision-making is achieved. These concrete actions are taken and complemented with progress monitoring. However, unfortunately, the same is not being seen in political decision-making and legislature. Therefore, there is an urgent need to adopt a policy or introduce a legislation for an intervention to increase the numerical representation of women in the legislature. The so-called 30% Policy is a policy statement, as it did not come with any detailed information (i.e., mission, vision, objectives, and strategic execution plan). The status of this 30% Policy was also highlighted by Syed Sheikh (2010:16) stating that "although the 30% Women in Decision Making Policy was introduced in 2004, this policy is a simple policy compared to other policies".

This paper proposes the transformation of the existing 30% Policy, introduced in 2004, into a full-fledged policy, which will become the umbrella policy to ensure other concrete actions follow suit. Other concrete actions that can be taken are:

- A. Party Quotas:** Quotas can be adopted by individual parties for their own candidate lists, and often be stated in the party constitutions or rules (Dahlerup et al 2014). As at mid-2022, in Malaysia, two political parties have adopted this quota: The People's Justice Party (PKR): the statutes regulate that 30 percent of leadership positions have to be held by women and; the Democratic Action Party (DAP): Article 16 (Clause VIII) states that the party congress reserves 30 percent of the total quota for female members to contest in the elections (Dahlerup et al., 2014).
- B. Legislated "reserved seats":** This refers to measures to regulate by law the gender composition of elected bodies, by reserving a certain percentage of seats for women members, implemented through special electoral procedures (IDEA 2022). In the Malaysian context, several states legislatures have adopted this type of quota. The State of Terengganu, under the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) government, had changed its state constitution in 2003 to allow for the appointment of up to four women or non-Muslim nominated state legislative assembly members (ADUNs), if no woman or non-Muslim was elected. Article 27(2) of Terengganu's State Constitution states:

“**“** *If at any time, there is no non-Muslim or woman elected to the State Legislative Assembly, subject to the following provisions, the State Legislative Assembly may on a motion supported by not less than seven members of the State Legislative Assembly and approved by a simple majority, appoint non-Muslims and/or women to represent non-Muslims and/or women provided that the appointed members do not exceed four people.” (Undang-Undang Tubuh Negeri Terengganu, 2008: 52)*

After the election (GE14) in 2018, one woman was appointed to be in the state assembly together with 32 other state assemblymen. She was appointed as a state assemblywoman for Women (Kerajaan Negeri Terengganu, 2022).

Besides Terengganu, the Penang state government has also introduced its own measure called Top-Up Women-Only Additional Seats (TOWAS). This measure aims to increase women's representation in their state legislative assembly, and will only be implemented if the percentage of women elected representatives is less than 30 percent. As of 2022 (or after GE14), there are six state assemblywomen and 34 state assemblymen (Dewan Undangan Negeri Pulau Pinang, n.d.), which equals to only 15 percent women representation. However, this initiative has yet to be put into action as it requires an amendment, or a new enactment, to the state's constitution to cover the mechanism, rights, and privileges of the nominated assemblywomen (Buletin Mutiara, 2020).

Kelantan is another state which has adopted a form of measure to increase women representation in leadership positions. The state was the first in the country to appoint a Penghulu Wanita Tanpa Mukim (non-district women chiefs), and in 2022, there are 45 of them throughout the state. Their roles are to manage, coordinate, and solve women's problems in society and the family, and they work closely with the respective constituency's state assemblywoman or man (Ahmad Zakuan, 2022).

- C. **Legislated candidate quotas** regulate the gender composition of the candidate lists and are binding by law for all political parties in the election, and they are mandated either through national constitutions or by electoral legislation (Dahlerup et al., 2014).

From the examples given, it can be seen that there are efforts and measures being taken by a few political parties and states to increase the number of women in the political leadership and decision-making. However, these efforts are inadequate due to the small number of stakeholders participating in it. Therefore, transforming the 2004 30% Policy Women in the Decision Making in Public Sector from a simple policy statement into a full-fledged policy, can be an impetus to push other political parties, agencies, states, and even federal actors including parliament, to introduce more viable and concrete steps. This in turn could achieve the targeted percentage of women in leadership and decision-making positions. The potential impact of this can be observed as reflected in a study on gender mainstreaming in the public sector in Malaysia by Ismail and Ramli (2021). They explained that the target of achieving 30 percent women in the public sector was achieved by the end of 2010 when five women were appointed as Chief Secretary in five ministries. Both authors argued that, although the target was achieved as a whole, it was not reflected in other public organisations. In fact, the appointments were a result of the pressure put by the then Minister of Women Affairs. This shows that, as the authors argue, "the government actually needs to make the 30 percent quota a rule, and not just as a general policy statement as it is currently practiced" (Ismail and Ramli, 2021, 80).

ENHANCE WOMEN'S AGENCY

The study's findings revealed that women in politics tend to face issues of low self-confidence and lack skills and knowledge on politics and policies. These have been elaborated in earlier discussions. Taking this into account, upgrading women's agency will be one of the crucial ways to empower women towards taking leadership and decision-making positions in politics. Referring specifically to the first two key dimensions of women's agency, women need to a) upskill themselves with the relevant skills and knowledge which will help them in mastering politics, governance, and state policies, and b) have the right mindset and awareness of their roles in the parties and politics in general. Women need to set clear goals in their personal political ambitions or the roles they can play in their respective parties in general. It is also very strategic if women can familiarise themselves with the respective parties' rules, policies and procedures.

The third key dimension of women's agency relates with the external structure in empowering women. The external structure, in this context, could include the women members in the parties and the public in general. These two groups need to have a strong awareness of the importance of women leadership in politics, as their awareness could impact the level of support they provide to meet the needs of women leaders in their political parties. Women party members will support the cause and efforts of the women leaders in their parties and in politics in general. It is clear that when the three dimensions of women's agency are enhanced, women will have the internal ability to act towards their goals and emerge as strong and effective leaders supported by a strong network of other women leaders, party members as well as the public at large.

STRENGTHENING PARTY STRUCTURE AND POLICIES

Political parties are the main actors in politics as they hold the control over the selection and nomination of candidates. They are the gatekeepers to elected positions, and thus determine the inclusion or exclusion of women and other under-represented groups in politics. They also recruit and appoint individuals to leading positions in internal party organisations and in parliament, as cabinet ministers and as members of commissions and boards, and they have a central position in policy formation (Dahlerup and Leyenaar, 2013).

Several issues related to the structure of political parties surfaced in this study. First, the transition from the youth to the women wing causes a vacuum in the party's women leadership. Second, younger women experience more discrimination in the parties. Third, the low number of women holding party top leadership posts is pronounced. These three critical issues should be given due attention by political parties.

The political parties need to take corrective measures to ensure that gender equality is achieved, where women (including younger women) are visible and represented in the party leadership on an equal footing as men. This is because women do not only represent a large number in party membership, their role and contributions to the development, survival, and victory of the parties in elections are undisputed. Taking into account the role they play, political parties need to strengthen its structure to ensure that women in their respective parties are well represented in their main decision-making bodies.

An enabling environment in the political parties that incorporate leadership opportunities and positions should include introducing gender equality and gender-related policies. Gender equality should be the new norm embraced by the political parties as it can help eliminate male dominance and gender bias in politics and construct norms which are egalitarian and inclusive, as well as sensitive to the needs, demands and constraints of the women party members.

Capacity-building should be mainstreamed in the political parties. It is an integral part of any measure for meaningful political participation and can enhance appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes of the party's leaders and members, thereby increasing the level of political efficacy, and consequently allow parties to perform their roles in a more effective and stronger manner. A smart partnership between political parties and other actors such as NGOs, regional and international bodies will make capacity-building a norm in political parties.

The 66th General Assembly of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), held on the 19 December 2011, introduced guidelines for political parties to empower women via the adoption of the UN Resolution on Women and Political Participation. Among the main measures identified, it urges states to:

1. **take all appropriate measures to eliminate prejudices** that are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women and that constitute a barrier to women's access to and participation in the political sphere, and to adopt inclusive approaches to their political participation;
2. **strongly encourage political parties to remove all barriers** that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women, to develop their capacity to analyse issues from gender perspective, and to adopt policies, as appropriate, to promote the ability of women to participate fully at all levels of decision-making within those political parties;
3. **develop mechanisms and training to encourage women to participate** in the electoral process, political activities, and other leadership activities, and empower women to assume public responsibilities by developing and providing appropriate tools and skills, in consultation with women (General Assembly Resolution, 19 March 2012).

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper illustrate that the challenges faced by women in the political parties reflect similar challenges to those faced by women in the past. The reality of women in the political parties have not changed much over time, which shed light on why the political domain appears as the biggest gender gap compared to other domains. Despite educational advancement in the country, women continue to lag behind men in politics.

The most dominant challenges faced by women in political parties originate from the gendered roles of men and women in the family and social setting. The expectations of women as mothers, wives, and caretakers of families, and of men being more suitable as leaders, show the social construct of gender is extended and embedded into the setting and operations of politics and political parties. It has become the norm that shapes the roles of men and women in the political parties. It is unfortunate that these norms still dominate and persist until today, despite modernisation and development that has taken place in the country.

The challenges faced by women intensify as this gendered politics reinforces the domination of men in the political roles and structure, directly perpetuating the under-representation of women in political leadership and decision-making bodies, and women empowerment in politics in general. Until and unless these norms are deconstructed, women will never be able to achieve their political aspirations and ambitions. Gender stereotyping, women's agency, party structure and intersectionality of age and gender, as well as low political efficacy among women, in combination, have made leadership in politics for women very challenging.

Having women in the leadership and decision-making roles in politics is important for many reasons – it is a matter of representation, democracy as well as human rights. Women's full political and electoral rights are based on the principles of non-discrimination and equal enjoyment of rights including political rights as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights culminated in other core international human rights conventions such as International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966, as well as regional human rights treaties such as in Europe (1950), in America (1969) and in Africa (1981). Gender Equality, which includes women representation in politics, is also Goal 5 of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. The SDG 2030 is a global call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice and prosperity. Most importantly, the right is guaranteed in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia as one of the fundamental liberties to her people, men and women alike. Only by having parity in politics, voices from the ground can be heard and properly represented.

On 1 March 2022, the then Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Parliament and Law) Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar in his written parliamentary reply stated that the government does not plan to legislate a quota to ensure that at least 30 percent of Members of Parliament in Malaysia are women. He stated that, "However, political parties in Malaysia need to take up their responsibility to play a more significant role in training, empowering, and giving opportunities to women politicians so that they can contribute as defenders of the people and movers in the country's development" (Ova, 2022). His remarks indicated the government's stand that the responsibility of increasing the number of women in legislatures lies solely with political parties, and the government has no intention of playing a role in it.

The acceleration of women in leadership roles in politics should matter to all, including the government, political parties, civil society, and other stakeholders. It is critical to have a conducive ecosystem comprising multiple stakeholders to bridge the biggest gender gap in the country – which, from the viewpoint of this study, can be done effectively through legislation. Legislative change of course requires strong political will and commitment from the government.

This study has proposed three main strategies which include amending existing, or introducing new laws, enhancing women's agency and strengthening party structures and policies. These strategies simultaneously target the three main stakeholder groups – the government (legislature), party structure (political parties) and women's agency (the women themselves). These three key stakeholders all play crucial, central, and integrated roles in making politics more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable for Malaysia, thus promising a better outlook and future for all Malaysians.

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