MALAYSIA WOMEN & GIRLS FORUM 2020

REPORT

Malaysia’s Women & Girls at the heart of COVID-19 Recovery
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9. MWGF 2021 - Moving Forward
The Malaysia Women & Girls Forum (MWGF) is an annual event that brings together multiple stakeholders involved in the social and economic advancement of women and girls in Malaysia. The forum identifies, engages and tracks key social, economic and legislative changes that are needed to accelerate the rights and well-being of Malaysia’s women and girls.

MWGF is open to the public with panelists and speakers from the civil, non-governmental, academic, legislative, youth, public and private sectors representations respectively. The Forum is executed by its own secretariat (appointed by UNFPA on behalf of the UN Gender Results Group).

**MWGF Objectives:**
MWGF aims to be the bridge that connects the public, civil society and policy stakeholders in rapidly advancing the necessary social, economic and political solutions needed for Malaysia's women and girls.

Funded and supported by the UN and UNFPA Malaysia, MWGF collectively amplifies, tracks and provides proactive recommendations and solutions on the progress of advancing the rights and wellbeing of Malaysia's women and girls.

**MWGF Pillars:**
1. Building towards the 2030 SDGs
2. Attaining Gender Equality
3. Ending Gender-based Violence & Harmful Practices
4. Ending Unmet Need for Family Planning
5. Ending Preventable Maternal Death
6. Attaining Full Potential of Young People
The COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted the socio-economic aspects of Malaysia but it has also revealed fundamental gaps when it comes to the welfare and wellbeing of the country’s women & girls. Making up over half the population, along with the highest levels of graduates, Malaysia's women can play an instrumental part in guiding and speeding up Malaysia's recovery.

In order to make this a reality, it is important to concentrate on bridging gaps in terms of, economic parity, social & policy reforms, legislation, sexual & reproductive health rights, awareness drives as well as equitable funding.

MWGF 2020 Theme: Malaysia’s Women & Girls At the Heart of COVID-19 Recovery
The Sustainable Development Goals (or SDGs) as we know, are a highly ambitious and transformative development agenda that is driven by the principle of leaving no one behind. And we cannot do that if we do not prioritise 50% of our population, i.e; women and girls, who even in this 21st century, and in countries developed or developing, lack the equality and empowerment to be on par with their male counterparts.

Gender Equality is a critical crosscutting issue for SDG attainment in every part of the world. Especially so as we move and work together to recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has made women and girls even more vulnerable. It has revealed structural weaknesses in policies and systems; the lack of protection mechanisms and critical legislation. It has uncovered vital areas that need to be addressed such as:

- The embedding of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) as essentials
- Social protection for survivors of violence and abuse,
- Labour laws and discriminatory practices,
- Bridging the ever-evident gender pay gap, and
- The lack of legislative protection when it comes to sexual harassment.

It is an established fact that the SDGs will not be achieved if women and girls remain left behind. It is therefore our hope that the Malaysia Women and Girls Forum, will grow into a well established platform that provides a voice for women and girls, facilitating discussion and the way forward for critical issues; that it provides an annual benchmark of sorts for key reforms, advocacy and legislation that are needed to advance national priorities in line with the SDGs.

In addition to this, equitable legislation, social changes and the enhancement of women’s rights can further accelerate Malaysia’s journey towards a developed nation.. And we hope that this Women and Girls Forum can effectively complement the Government’s good efforts.

I would like to congratulate UNFPA Malaysia who lead the Gender Results group of the UN Country Team in Malaysia for undertaking and leading this timely inter-agency effort.

STEFAN PRIESNER
United Nations
Resident Coordinator
For Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Darussalam

Welcome Note

Stefan Priesner
United Nations
Resident Coordinator
For Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Darussalam
The trials and tribulations that this year has brought about for everyone has been and continues to be unprecedented. The COVID-19 pandemic’s socio-economic and political impact has brought numerous countries and communities to the brink... and no one has been as deeply impacted in these communities as women and girls.

Even though we can attribute a lot of the hardships to the impact of the pandemic, the truth of the matter is a lot simpler... and has been made apparent because of the pandemic.

The simple fact is that the essential foundations needed to ensure that women and girls are safe, and have equitable economic and social access are still not there. The pandemic has illuminated that for everyone. For example, it has shown us that the rise in reported domestic violence numbers are simply because survivors have to spend more time with their abusers at home. Domestic violence does not make a sudden appearance, it’s a pattern of behaviour.

It has shown us that rise in online gender based violence and abuse is not a matter of pent up frustration from being stuck at home, but a learned pattern of behaviour unleashed on keyboards with people who have more time on their hands.

Women, mothers and girls cut off from their daily earnings due to a lack of social protection or equitable economic access have to live on the edge of despair while their children lose interest in studying and sometimes malnourishment. All of these and much more are not because of the pandemic. They are deep rooted issues mired in the norms of yesteryear.

UNFPA Malaysia with the support and endorsement of the United Nations, is proud to have established MWGF to help voice, form and establish these core pillars that are needed for the welfare and wellbeing of Malaysia’s women and girls.

Our aspiration for the forum is for it to be a platform for ideas, perspectives and most importantly solutions. It’s where we want the voices of the youth to flourish and be guided
by experienced hands to jointly help guide the future of Malaysia’s women and girls.

In tandem, we have established 6 key pillars for MWGF, that we believe are essential to advance the status and potential of Malaysia’s women and girls.

1. Building towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals
2. Attaining Gender Equality
3. Ending Gender-based Violence & Harmful Practices
4. Ending Unmet Need for Family Planning
5. Ending Maternal Death &
6. Attaining the Full Potential of Young People

We have only 10 years to go to achieve the SDGs and Malaysia has committed itself to bringing about the tangible reality of an equitable, just and modern society for its people.

It is our commitment that for the next 10 years MWGF will continue to set benchmarks and yardsticks for necessary change in order to achieve that reality. It will also set the bar for what needs to be realised and attained before the next iteration of MWGF in 2021. In short, it will be a yardstick for achievable and attainable immediate solutions that are needed to ensure that the future of Malaysia’s women & girls is as bright as the country’s potential.

On behalf of the UNFPA Malaysia team, I thank you all for your presence, participation and support in making MWGF 2020 an effective and impactful endeavour.

NAJIB ASSIFI
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Malaysia Representative
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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>10 AM</td>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>Welcome address by Emcee, Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji, Independent Broadcast Journalist &amp; Gender Activist</td>
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<td>10:05 AM</td>
<td>Welcome Address</td>
<td>Mr. Stefan Priesner, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Malaysia, Singapore &amp; Brunei</td>
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<td>10:10 AM</td>
<td>Opening Remarks</td>
<td>Mr. Najib Assifi, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Malaysia Representative</td>
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<td>10:15 AM</td>
<td>Keynote Address</td>
<td>YB Senator Ras Adiba Radzi, OKU Representative, Upper House, Malaysian Parliament &amp; BERNAMA Chairperson</td>
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<td>10:25 AM</td>
<td>MWGF Launch Video</td>
<td>Official launch of the Inaugural Malaysia Women &amp; Girls Forum</td>
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<td>10:30 AM</td>
<td>Guidelines and Overview</td>
<td>Overall format, concept and Mechanism of MWGF by Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji</td>
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Plenary Session 1 - Driving The Economic Potential of Malaysian Women & Girls via key legislation and social reform

In the face of and aftershocks of the COVID-19 Pandemic, how can Malaysia keep to its promise of “No one left behind”. Without necessary legislation and resource allocation, Malaysian women’s labor force participation rate (LFPR) will continue to hinder national development. Currently, Malaysia is placed 104th on the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, behind most of its regional neighbours. What can be done to close the gaps and what is Malaysia missing out on? This session focused on:
  - tabling Malaysia’s Sexual Harassment Bill,
  - Labour Act amendments for Women in the workplace and
  - Bridging socio-economic gender gaps.

Keynote Session 2 - Young Women & Girls’ realities of online gender-based violence

The digital sphere has become an essential part of our daily social realities, particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns. In tandem, gender-based violence has also found a fertile ground. The impact of online GBV on the lived realities of women and girls is harsh, impacting their physical, emotional, psychosocial, educational and economic realities. What solutions, approaches and legislative countermeasures are needed to ensure online GBV does not hinder the growth potential of Malaysia's women & girls?

Keynote by:
  Natalie Hussain - Multimedia Journalist at R.AGE (The Star) and TV Host
Plenary Session 2: CSE and SRHR, where are we today? Women’s health as a barometer for Malaysia’s development

Ensuring women’s rights through comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) – a key premise of the landmark Programme of Action that stems from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, the precursor to the SDGs. Malaysia’s primary health care system for all its achievements to date, is still wrestling with a lack of strategic implementation for SRHR, which ultimately hinders Malaysia’s full potential.

This session concentrated on:
- SRHR - Paving the path towards the SDGs’
- CSE Progress and initiatives in the pipeline
- SRHR in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic

KEYNOTE 3: Case Study – Families on the Edge - A perspective on the plight of Female Headed & Vulnerable Households during the Pandemic

Taking into account how female headed households have endured the economic and social limitations of the lockdown. How their plight and challenges are a reflection of a lack of gender equality in Malaysia and what can we learn from it.

Keynote by:
Dr Muhammed Abdul Khalid - Managing Director and Chief Economist, DM Analytics Malaysia
1:45 PM - 2:45 PM

**Plenary Session 3: Gender Equality - The role of Malaysian Men & Boys and the Media**

For the current generation of young Malaysians. What does it take to remove socio-cultural barriers that are hindering the potential of Malaysian women & girls? How do we proactively address unhealthy masculinity especially in socio-political spheres? How can Malaysian Media help to shift the narrative towards a more egalitarian perspective when it comes to the socio-cultural depiction of women and girls? What will it take for Malaysian society to proactively begin addressing everyday sexism?

2:50 PM - 3:00 PM

**MWGF 2020 RESOLUTION**

A nominated representative from the Secretariat presented 10 key recommendations that will be compiled into the MWGF 2020 Report and presented to relevant ministries as well as the Special Select Committee on Women and Children Affairs and Social Development.
RESOLUTIONS & SUMMARY

The inaugural Malaysia Women & Girls Forum 2020, consisted of 3 keynote and 3 plenary sessions along with insights and participation of the live audience.

The vital issues brought to the fore included:

1) The importance of centring the COVID-19 recovery around Malaysia’s Women & Girls

2) Mechanisms, legislation, opportunity cost and the drive towards enhancing the economic potential of Malaysia’s women & girls.

3) Understanding the realities of online gender based violence

4) Women’s health, access to SRHR and CSE as barometer of National Development

5) Understanding the Plight of female headed households during the pandemic

6) The role of Malaysian men & boys as well the media in attaining gender equality.

With the coordination and expertise of the moderators from each session, MWGF’s secretariat have outlined and identified 10 resolutions to conclude MWGF. 2020.

These 10 resolutions embrace both the long and short term essentials needed for Malaysia’s women to not only be centred in national recovery but to set the foundations needed to achieve gender equality in tandem with the 2030 SDGs.

The secretariat will be monitoring the progress of these resolutions throughout the year and will engage stakeholders throughout to understand the roadblocks in implementation.

These resolutions and the MWGF 2020 report will be submitted to relevant ministries and select committees along with recommendations and rationale.
**Resolution 1**
Introduce a Sexual Harassment Act to ensure survivors have no reason to fear a lack of legal protection or remedy.

**Resolution 2**
Encourage and nurture girls in STEM fields of study so Malaysia can achieve gender parity

**Resolution 3**
Push for the protection of Women & Girls against gender-based cyber violence and create safer spaces online

**Resolution 4**
Reinforce girls’ access to comprehensive sex education to reduce unsafe practices and prevent child sexual abuse.

**Resolution 5**
Provide women and girls with unlimited access to sexual and reproductive health services so they can take control of their bodily autonomy.
Resolution 6
Raise awareness regarding gaps in the legal environment and push for criminalisation of domestic abuse and child marriage.

Resolution 7
Ensure the economic protection of women and safeguard their employment during the Covid-19 pandemic via legal reform and access to quality childcare, maternal and paternal leave.

Resolution 8
Platform and amplify the voices of women in media, politics and other decision-making roles.

Resolution 9
Engage with men and boys, male policy makers and the mainstream media to build the necessary capacity for inclusiveness, in order to educate and shed unhealthy masculinity.

Resolution 10
To ensure that there is equal access to justice via uniformity of laws within the federal and state constitutions.
HOST, SPEAKERS & MODERATORS

Tehmina Kaoosji - Host & Emcee
Independent Broadcast Journalist & Gender Activist

YB. Senator Ras Adiba Radzi
OKU Representative, Upper House, Malaysian Parliament & BERNAMA Chairperson

Mei Ling Tan
Country Operations Officer and Gender Country Focal Point, World Bank Inclusive Growth & Sustainable Finance Hub, Malaysia

YB. Sumitra Visvanathan
Executive Director, Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

Natalie Hussain
Multimedia Journalist at R.AGE (The Star) and TV Host.

Nisha Sabanayagam
Program & Operations Manager, All Women's Action Society (AWAM)

Dr. Melati Nungsari
Assistant Professor of Economics at Asia School of Business and Research Affiliate at MIT Sloan School of Management

Mei Ling Tan
Country Operations Officer and Gender Country Focal Point, World Bank Inclusive Growth & Sustainable Finance Hub, Malaysia

Dr. Hamizah Mohd. Hassan
Head of Reproductive Health Unit, National Population & Family Development Board (LPPKN), Malaysia

Siti Aishah Hassan Hasri
Founder, Spot Community Programme
HOST, SPEAKERS & MODERATORS

Dr. Mike Penkunas
Research Fellow at the United Nations University International Institute for Global Health

Aina Fadzil
Head of PR, dearher

Zurairi A.R.
Assistant News Editor, Malay Mail

Dr. Nurul Haq Shahrir
UNFPA Malaysia Consultant on Religion and Interlocutor for Inter-religious Dialogue

Jasmine Rajah
Sexual Health Advocate & Educator

Tharma Pillai
Co-Founder & Advocacy Director, UNDI18

Dr. Muhammed Abdul Khalid
Managing Director & Chief Economist, DM Analytics, Malaysia

Nailah Huda
Broadcast Journalist, Astro Awani

Rizal Rozhan
Organiser, Men Against Toxic Masculinity (MAT)
Keynote Session 1

Malaysia’s Women & Girls at the Heart of COVID-19 Recovery

Speaker:

Senator Ras Adiba Radzi began her keynote speech by commending the UN and UNFPA Malaysia for organising MWGF, and noted that its timing could not be better—not just because it addresses the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but because it is a reminder that 2030, the target year for achieving the SDGs, is exactly a decade away.

Ras Adiba echoed the fact that the crisis has only made things worse for those already marginalised by pre-existing barriers such as social class, poverty and disability. To cast away the long shadow cast by COVID-19, and to shape a better, more robust and equitable Malaysia, she said, women and girls need to be placed at the heart of post-pandemic recovery.

One of the biggest inequalities brought about by COVID-19 has been the burden of unpaid care work for women and girls under the Movement Control Order (MCO) lockdown. This is exacerbated by the ‘shadow pandemic’ of domestic violence, with many unable to leave abusive situations due to restricted movement, evidenced by the huge surge—anywhere between 60 to 400 percent—in calls to both national and CSO helplines for assistance.

As Ras Adiba stressed, it is vital to ensure in the midst of this situation that Malaysian women and girls do not get left behind socially, economically and educationally. Fortunately, she added, some solutions for combating gender inequality and outdated norms are clear—more robust outreach and awareness programmes, through which men and boys become more gender sensitised.
The senator also touched on the growing problem of online gender-based violence, which has similarly spiked during the pandemic.

Between March and June this year, South and Southeast Asia saw a staggering 168 percent increase in misogynistic online content.

Online gender-based violence is just as harmful as physical gender-based violence, and can result in depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety for survivors. This, she stated, necessitated a standalone Sexual Harassment Act to ensure that survivors feel empowered to take action and do not live in fear due to a lack of protective legislation.

Ras Adiba also touched on the lack of access to healthcare for women and girls during the lockdown. This includes access to sexual and reproductive health as such services were deemed secondary, rather than the essential services which they are.

During the first part of the MCO, she noted, all LPPKN clinics were shuttered, preventing subsidised access to family planning and reproductive health services for many women and girls. The high rates of teenage pregnancies and baby dumping continue to be a challenge, and underlines the need for better access to information, safe and affordable contraceptive access and SRHR services.

Despite these challenges, Ras Adiba noted, the women of Malaysia have never been more educated nor more empowered by digital access and knowledge. Continued investment in education, family planning, maternal mortality prevention, digital inclusion, and unpaid care work will help bridge the gaps exposed by COVID-19.

The senator ended her speech with a reminder that nation building is not and never has been the exclusive domain of men. By recognising the significant role of women, she added, Malaysia can definitely achieve gender equality through promoting the full rights of women and girls.
PLenary Session 1

Driving The Economic Potential of Malaysian Women & Girls via key legislation and social reform

Moderator:

Dr. Melati Nungsari
Assistant Professor of Economics at Asia School of Business and Research Affiliate at MIT Sloan School of Management

YB.Sumitra Visvanathan
Executive Director, Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

Nisha Sabanayagam
Program & Operations Manager, All Women's Action Society (AWAM)

Mei Ling Tan
Country Operations Officer and Gender Country Focal Point, World Bank Inclusive Growth & Sustainable Finance Hub, Malaysia

Key Takeaways -

1. Sexual Harassment Bill needs to be tabled due to the increase in cases, especially during the MCO period.
2. Passing the SH Bill will help create a “one-way” process that will move things rapidly and welcome more victims to step forward.
3. The “Silent Pandemic” involving women and girls need to be highlighted.
4. It is important to safeguard women’s employment after the pandemic and reform laws, especially the Employment Act.
5. There is a direct link between violence against women and their economic empowerment.
6. Subsidising quality childcare and elderly care to be done in ensuring that more women can contribute towards the economy.
7. Paid maternity leave should be extended up to 90 days for all government and private sectors, in line with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) guidelines.
8. Paternity leave should be extended up to one week to provide support for the mother and child.
9. Increase more opportunities and positions for women at every position in the workplace.
10. Increase female participation in politics to have gender sensitised legislation.
11. Tabling the Employment Act, Industrial Relations Act and Trades Union Act, to better suit women and protect their rights.
The session began with Nisha Sabanayagam outlining the status, development and advocacy for the Sexual Harassment Bill. The Women’s Centre for Change Penang began work on the bill as far back as 1990, with the support of the All Women’s Action Society (AWAM).

Over the years, other NGOs such as the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO) and Young Women Making Change became involved in drafting the bill. But it was only in 2018 that the government decided to take a serious look at the issue of sexual harassment, and started to push the bill forward.

As Nisha noted, political advocacy picked up during this period—including from members of the then-administration pushing for the SH Bill to be tabled, as they wanted Malaysians to be aware of the gravity of the issue.

In 2019, several women’s groups got together to finalise a draft bill to support the government’s aims of getting a standalone Act passed later that year or the next. The effort was supported by other stakeholders, including the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry (KPWKM) until November that year, when the draft bill was ready.

Awam was confident that the bill would have been passed in the March 2020 Parliament sitting. However, this plan was upended by the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government in February, and the MCO a month later.

During the MCO, the ‘pandemic within a pandemic’ of gender-based violence began to emerge. Interestingly, she added, many began to speak out in public about the rise in sexual harassment and the necessity of passing the bill. The new Women, Family and Community Development Minister, Rina Harun even promised that it would be tabled by the end of the year.

It was then that Awam decided to push their advocacy further by taking an unprecedented route—going into the Parliament building during the August sitting and meeting MPs from both sides of the divide. The MPs that AWAM met were asked to support the tabling of the Sexual Harassment Bill in November 2020, and to show that support on social media. Surprisingly, according to Nisha, this plan was successful in that it resulted in a lot of Malaysians talking about sexual harassment.

In the process of speaking to MPs, Nisha explained, AWAM also managed to secure some direct interventions. After showing Youth and Sports Minister Reezal Merican statistics stating that sexual harassment in sports overwhelmingly affects men, he made sure the agencies under his ministry worked with AWAM to get training on sexual harassment. This then led to the Women Development Department under KPWKM also receiving training from AWAM.

Whether the government would table the Sexual Harassment Bill or not, AWAM decided to continue spreading as much awareness as possible. It built new partnerships with organisations such as Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and the Malaysian Paralympic Council (MPC)—to highlight the seriousness of the issue.

It also started reaching out to young people and engaged social media influencers, reaching out to more women and girls. University students also came forward and asked AWAM to participate in their own programmes on sexual harassment.

Additionally, AWAM introduced the ‘AWAM for the Bill’ campaign and an online petition, which has over 17,000 signatures to date. Nisha added that a paper petition, which over 500 people signed, was read out by MP Kasthurri Patto in Parliament to enable a discussion about the Sexual Harassment Bill in the March 2021 Parliament sitting.
Sumitra Visvanathan of WAO stressed that the year defined by the Covid-19 pandemic is ‘pivot time’—Malaysia has never been confronted with challenges that have been more daunting, and it is time to shine a light on all of the issues impacting women, families and children.

When it comes to women’s economic rights, WAO aims to bring attention to three main issues: safeguarding women’s employment after the pandemic; reforming laws, most importantly the Employment Act; and recognising the direct link between violence against women and their economic empowerment.

As Sumitra explained, WAO has been delving into data-driven advocacy to complement the evidence gleaned from women’s lived experiences. The data shows that while women’s unemployment has always been higher than men in Malaysia, the difference is much greater now.

One major reason for this is the cost and accessibility of childcare. As such, WAO has long been advocating for subsidised quality childcare—as opposed to tax exemptions for childcare, which excludes those who are in most in need of such support.

In terms of amending the Employment Act to strengthen labour protections for vulnerable workers, especially women workers, a whole slew of changes are needed. Sumitra noted that the government has accepted some changes to the law, but not enough to mark a discernible shift.

The Employment Act already prohibits discrimination based on the protected characteristics of gender, race and religion, but this still does not go far enough, she said, as it fails to protect employees from discrimination on the basis of marital and motherhood status, as well as sexual harassment.

At present, public sector workers are entitled to 90 days’ paid maternity leave, while those in the private sector get 60 days. Extending paid maternity leave to 90 days across the board would bring Malaysia in line with the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) minimum standard, ensure better health outcomes for mothers, and help keep women in the workforce.

WAO is also advocating for paternity leave to be extended to a week. This would help ensure that women have the care and support to become economically productive again after childbirth. As Sumitra explained, it is fundamentally about strengthening social protections to enable Malaysians to fully participate in the economy.

As Sumitra explained, the participation rate of Malaysian women in the labour force is one of the lowest in the region, sexual harassment in the workplace is rife, and gender-based violence is on the rise. As such, she ended her presentation by reiterating that this is the time to pivot—it is time to learn from the data, learn from lived experiences, and make the pivot to reform laws to support women’s participation in the economy.
Mei Ling Tan
Country Operations Officer and Gender Country Focal Point, World Bank
Inclusive Growth & Sustainable Finance Hub in Malaysia

Mei Ling Tan presented key highlights from the World Bank’s *Breaking Barriers: Toward Better Economic Opportunities for Women in Malaysia* report. She began by noting that Malaysia seems to be faring well in terms of education, with more girls and women enrolled in schools and universities than boys, and doing better in terms of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores.

A deeper dive into the data shows that this situation is not unique to Malaysia, and is replicated throughout the region. While still dominated by men, Malaysia fares better than South Korea, Norway and Japan in terms of the percentage of girls enrolling in engineering courses. The gap is also closing, with gender parity in these courses expected to be achieved in 20 to 30 years.

However, this does not translate to the workplace, with a labour force participation rate of just 55.2 percent to 80.4 percent for men, despite a discernible increase in the last decade. This gap—the fourth largest in the region—becomes even more apparent further up the ladder, with women making up only 22 percent of senior management roles, and 18 percent of employers.

Accordingly, there is a large pay gap between women and men that is most apparent at the bottom and top of the ladder. For the bottom 40 percent (B40) strata, this is largely due to underemployment and women falling out of the labour force. The gap among the top 10 percent (T10) strata, meanwhile, can be attributed to the lack of women in senior positions.

On this note, Tan showed that despite Putrajaya’s stated aim of having at least 30 percent women in senior positions, the number of women in board, board chair and senior management roles is markedly lower than in regional neighbours Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—although these countries do not have such a target.

This is due to a higher female labour force participation on the whole for these countries, which means a bigger and stronger talent pipeline. She added that this is not even just an issue of gender rights, with companies across the region with more diversity—in terms of gender, age and background—on their boards recording higher profits.

The World Bank study also compared women’s participation in parliamentary and ministerial positions, in which Malaysia also fared poorly compared to its neighbours. This is due to fewer women running for office, which results in fewer winning elections, and fewer still being appointed to the Cabinet. Tan stressed that it is important to get more women to run for political office, as it will invariably impact legal reforms and policy-making.

At present, Malaysia also scores poorly in terms of gender reform and legislative framework for women. The country, as noted above, does not have maternity leave provisions in line with international norms, zero mandated paternity leave, and does not prohibit the dismissal of pregnant workers. Amendments to the Employment Act, Industrial Relations Act and Trades Unions Act, she added, were due to be tabled in November 2019, then March 2020, but have since stalled.

Tan ended her presentation by noting that the labour force participation of women is low generally due to housework as well as child and elder care—a situation that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with women now having to do double duty on the job and at home. She warned that this could not just wipe out the gains achieved by women in the last decade, but further impede economic growth and prevent Malaysia from becoming a high-income nation.
In the Q&A session, moderator Dr Melati Nungsari asked Nisha whether the spike in reported sexual harassment cases was due to a larger number of incidents being perpetrated overall, or a better public understanding of the issue.

According to Nisha, the answer is both. The marked increase in sexual harassment cases, she said, is best demonstrated by the V2K Telegram group exposed in October. The group had nearly 40,000 members, who shared pictures of women without their consent, and even contained child pornography.

At the same time, AWAM and other women's groups are receiving more reports because the issue is being talked about more—not just in Malaysia, but around the world. Still, she added, for every case that is reported, about five to seven cases are not.

To a question on parity when it comes to maternity and paternity leave, Sumitra explained that WAO is taking an incremental approach by advocating for seven days—and even this, she added, is facing pushback from employers.

Melati also questioned Tan on some ‘mini reforms’ that can be implemented on the way to achieving larger, more impactful legislative reforms. She answered that having just a social debate on the participation of women in the labour force would have limited impact. Instead, advocacy should highlight the economic link—to demonstrate that the low rates are impeding Malaysia's economic growth.

Nisha added that she supports Tan's suggestion of bringing men into the conversation on shared responsibility by proffering an anecdote. She noted that a social media post on men being sexually harassed achieved over ten times the reach of Awam's usual reach of 2,000 to 4,000 for posts on women being harassed, which showed that people are not talking enough about the issue affecting men as well.
Keynote Session 2

Driving The Economic Potential of Malaysian Women & Girls via key legislation and social reform

Moderator:

Tehmina Kaoosji - Host & Emcee
Independent Broadcast Journalist & Gender Activist

Speaker:

Natalie Hussain
Multimedia Journalist at R.AGE (The Star) and TV Host.

Key Takeaways -

1. Online gender based violence has increased rapidly due to the digital community that we live in.
2. The pandemic has caused a complete shift online leaving women and girls more vulnerable to experience gender based violence in both professional and casual settings.
3. Online GBV causes more harm due to the absence of law and consequences that can happen to the perpetrator.
4. Women and girls are constantly silenced in digital spheres.
5. There is urgency to create laws that specifically targets online gender based violence.
6. Digital responsibility which includes social awareness, and code of conduct needs to be included and taught in schools to ensure that digital engagements are conducive and not harmful.
7. Vital to ensure that there is equal representation in tech companies - in each and every layer of their corporate & operational structures.
In her keynote speech, journalist Natalie Hussain characterised COVID-19 as the first major pandemic of the social media age, with lockdown measures forcing people to rely even more heavily on social media and the internet. Accompanying this was an increase in cyber violence. Online Gender-Based Violence is something that some can ignore, but as she stressed, it is the lived reality of many others.

As early as 2011, Malaysians were already showing signs of heavy internet usage, with observers also pointing out that women were disproportionately affected by Online Gender-Based Violence at the time. Many were too wrapped up in the gift of connectivity that turned a blind eye to online abuse—deemed less real than physical abuse.

In 2017, a report by a local NGO submitted to the UN raised concerns about cyber violence, and noted that law enforcers were acting very blasé towards the issue. Survivors at the time who were spoken to, felt that authorities not just normalised, but trivialised the abuse that they faced.

Authorities would classify such cases as a private matter, or advise survivors to shut down their social media accounts. This, Natalie explained, has serious consequences, as it effectively silences women, and encourages online aggressors to continue as they face little to no consequences.

A 2018 survey conducted showed that and Malaysia was second in Asia for aggressive cyberbullying. A UNICEF poll conducted in the following year showed that four out of nine youths had friends or acquaintances in group chats who specifically used to bully their peers.

As a case in point, Natalie brought up the case of the V2K group on Telegram from October. Aside from sharing photos of girls—some underage—without their consent, members also shared contact details of girls who would then be subject to harassment.

What we are witnessing now, she added, is violence against women and girls being widespread like never before because of connectivity, which has effectively become a curse to women and girls at this point.

In July, 20-year-old Thivya Nayagi was driven to suicide after a Facebook group encouraged its 70,000 followers to cyberbully her. Cyber violence, Natalie stressed, is claiming lives. And there are many women and girls who are experiencing right now what Thivya did, mentally and emotionally.

One upside of the time spent online in 2020 is that many are lending their voices to human rights-related issues, from the crackdown on migrant workers early in the year to showing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Many Malaysians have also found strength during the pandemic - sexual harassment survivors have spoken out against their perpetrators on Twitter. Most recently, Malaysians broke their silence about celebrity preacher Da’i Syed. This had a real-world effect, with more survivors being encouraged to come forward, and the preacher being charged with multiple counts of rape and molestation.

What is incredibly toxic, however, is that the women in media, politics and entertainment face online abuse for speaking out against harassment. This not only has the effect of silencing women, but it sends the message to young people that if you speak out, you will be a target, and you will be punished.
Tehmina returned to the issue of the V2K Telegram group in the Q&A session. She pointed out that the sharing of non-consensual intimate images (NCII) is actually a crime in Malaysia, but that the men in these groups still considered the violation of consent as pornography. As such, she asked what could be done to bring about a change in mindset.

Natalie responded by noting that many men and boys do not fully realise the severity of what they are doing, because the objectification of women is so normalised. For young men and boys, this could be undone to an extent with the inclusion of Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights (SRHR) in the school syllabus. This should be accompanied by moving away from educational materials that victim-blame—because that insinuates that women and girls are the problem, and are ‘asking for it.’ She added that the media should also play a role in underlining the gravity of Online Gender-Based Violence, because many Malaysians still do not think it is a big deal.

On that note, Tehmina asked if anything could be done to make being online a safe space for women and girls to express themselves freely. Natalie responded by reiterating that there is a need for clear protocols on what women and girls can do when encountering harassment.

Tehmina then pointed out that the creator of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, said upon the internet turning 31 this year that it is “not working for women and girls,” and asked what tech giants can do to make the internet safer.

In response, Natalie said that as with many other industries, women are still the minority in tech. These firms, she added, need to hire more women across all layers of the corporations, not just to ensure more equal representation, but also to enforce change.
Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) and Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights (SRHR), where are we today? Women’s health as a barometer for Malaysia's development.

Moderator:

**Jasmine Rajah**
Sexual Health Advocate

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**Key Takeaways** -

1. Poor SRHE can cause harmful sexual abuse and child marriage, especially in low income households.

2. Sufficient coverage and accessibility to Sexual and Reproductive Health Education (SRHE) programs can promote better sexual and reproductive health amongst Malaysian women, girls and adolescent teens.

3. CSE does not promote sexual activity or risky sexual behaviours, it teaches young boys and girls about dignity and methods of protection from abuse and other unwanted sexual advances.

4. CSE can decrease the number of unwanted teenage pregnancies while simultaneously decreasing the number of baby dumping cases as well.

5. CSE can provide information on safer sex and contraception, curbing the number of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI).

6. Teachers and educators need to be trained on methods to integrate CSE in the school syllabus, therefore allowing themselves to be a point of reference to the students.

7. Informed choices should be given to young women, girls and parents to prevent child sexual abuse, unsafe sex practices amongst children and prevent child marriages.

8. There needs to be a stigma-free frontline response from LPPKN and the Health Ministry or relevant authorities.

9. A module on SRHR and educating young men and women is the best step forward for the future.
In her presentation, Dr Hamizah Mohd Hassan of the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) provided an outline of the CSE and SRHR situation in Malaysia. She began by noting that some of the outcomes associated to the lack of SRHR include teenage pregnancies, sexual abuse, underage marriage, sexually transmitted infections, unsafe abortions, gender-based violence, and baby dumping.

Teenage pregnancies are showing a downward trend, but have remained at 25-30 percent of all pregnancies over the past three years. Hamizah stressed that knowledge of SRHR remains low among youths, and that more prevention and intervention programmes are needed in both formal and informal education systems.

Malaysia has its own specific policy on sexual and reproductive health education (SRHE), namely the National Policy on Reproductive Health and Social Education (PEKERTI) and its plan of action. PEKERTI, introduced in 2009, is under the jurisdiction of The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM), with LPPKN being the agency responsible for coordinating national reproductive health programmes—including producing trainers among students, workshops to target groups, and KafeTeen centres for adolescents to learn about SRHE.

Between 2011 and 2015, Hamizah noted, 267,000 young adults benefited from the SRHE modules by LPPKN at the now-defunct National Service (PLKN) camps. The agency has also reached nearly 300,000 participants through SRHE programmes in teachers’ colleges, community colleges, and public schools. From this number, about 3,000 trainers were produced.

LPPKN has set up 18 KafeTeen centres in 10 states across the country, with plans to expand into Selangor, Terengganu, Perlis and Perak. These centres are run by teen educators who conduct SRHE activities, training and social counselling services. Since 2006, 103,955 adolescents have been recruited as KafeTeen members.

Dr. Hamizah stated that poor SRHE has also been identified as one of the contributing causes of child marriage, along with low household income, lack of support system for parents, sociocultural norms, and the legal systems in Malaysia.

To carry out the PEKERTI plan of action, LPPKN is working to improve coverage and accessibility to SRHE programmes, such as with the introduction of the MyKafeTeen mobile application, with the support of UNFPA Malaysia, to expand its services to difficult to reach adolescents.

However, LPPKN’s plan to expand KafeTeen clubs to more schools was scuppered due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The pandemic also limited the agency’s ability to do field work, forcing them to rely on online reach instead.

Dr. Hamizah ended her presentation with her hope for more collaboration with stakeholders to ensure sufficient coverage and accessibility to SRHE programmes, which will enable Malaysian women and girls to have opportunities to lead healthy reproductive lives.
As Dr Mike Penkunas explained, the UN University International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) was asked by UNFPA and LPPKN to conduct a comparison of CSE in Malaysia with four other Sunni-majority countries: Turkey, Morocco, Egypt, Bangladesh.

The study was designed to develop a set of recommendations to inform Malaysia’s 2020-2024 PEKERTI plan of action, as well as to the achievement of Malaysia’s international commitments to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) plan of action and the SDGs.

According to Penkunas, although all five countries studied endorsed the ICPD plan of action, the implementation of CSE programming remained a challenge, primarily due to misconceptions based on religious precepts.

This was so despite many studies showing that CSE does not contribute to increased sexual activity or riskier sexual behaviour. As a result of these misconceptions, the five countries generally relied on abstinence-based teachings rather than an informed choice education curriculum.

Additionally, due to cultural influences that make conversations around sex and sexuality taboo, as well as sexual relationships outside of marriage being largely forbidden, there is very minimal information on safer sex and contraception options available to young people.

The UNU-IIGH study concluded that these shortfalls translate into a non-comprehensive approach to sexuality education. Along with a lack of SRHR services for unmarried youth, young people—young women in particular—face a heightened risk of abuses, sexually-transmitted infections, and unplanned pregnancies.

As Penkunas stressed, urgent action is needed in the face of these findings. Malaysia, he added, should reframe CSE as a public health issue, and to integrate it into teachers’ training courses. This will help to address the overall issue where teachers are not fully trained and not supported in delivering CSE—which has thus far led to a delivery of fragmented messaging and perpetuated an abstinence-based curriculum.

Parents, along with progressive community and faith-based leaders, can also be engaged to generate social support and clear lingering misconceptions around CSE. This can be carried out alongside community mobilisation via a mass media campaign to advocate for the importance of CSE for the health and well-being of youths.

To overcome the limited reach of SRHR programmes and services, particularly for vulnerable, out of school youth, Penkunas suggested leveraging on a peer-based learning model, which can be powerful in transforming the attitudes of young people. Digital tools can also be utilised to deliver SRHR messaging in a manner that would resonate strongly with younger audiences.

Lastly, the UNU-IIGH study also recommended using LPPKN’s Advisory and Coordinating Committee for Reproductive Health (ACCRH) to improve collaboration and coordination with NGO and private sector partners and to oversee the implementation of the PEKERTI plan of action.
Siti Aishah Hassan Hasri
Founder, SPOT Community Programme

Siti Aishah Hassan Hasri began her presentation with a series of statistics. One in three young people in Malaysia said that their first sexual experience was before the age of 14. One in three young Malaysian women believe that they will not get pregnant having sex just one time. One in five believe that STIs can be contracted through mosquito bites.

Fourteen out of every 1,000 girls fall pregnant every year. Forty-five teenage girls give birth every day. Rapists avoid prosecution by marrying their victims. Over 100,000 women have been raped by their intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. Malaysia is one of just 28 countries that still have marital rape exemption laws.

Siti Aishah explained that she founded Spot to help parents and teachers initiate respectful conversations around the topic of sex and sexuality, in order to prevent child sexual abuse, reduce unsafe sex practices amongst children and prevent child marriages. Which, she added, is very much aligned to the activities that the government is carrying out.

Spot gets its volunteers to go into schools and speak to young children about what sex, pregnancy, contraception and STIs are. It also talks about sexualised behaviours, as well as focus on bodily integrity, responsibilities, boundaries, rights, and the laws around consent and sex in Malaysia.

As Siti Aishah pointed out, this is also aligned with SDGs 3, 4 and 5 on good health and wellbeing, quality education and gender equality. Since Spot’s inception in 2015, CSE modules have been delivered to 10,617 girls and 79 schools across six states.

In short, she said, Spot is in the business of tragedy prevention, and was aiming to empower 20,000 girls every year by the end of 2020. But the ‘triple whammy’ of political instability, economic instability, and the pandemic forced Spot to scale down, and instead focus on creating meaningful engagements one community at a time.

Siti Aishah added that she created the hashtag #pubertywithdignity this year to cover all the major aspects of CSE—which is more inclusive in terms of gender and sexuality than Spot’s previous hashtag of #nothingtohaid, which focused more on reproductive health.

Scaling down also entailed redesigning all Spot content to move into a digital structure, complete with the necessary tools and support. To do this, it consulted teachers, psychologists, gynaecologists, private health experts, schoolchildren and parents over a nine-month period. Spot is also working together with Unicef, Unesco, UNHCR, Digital Sexuality Education Asia-Pacific Network, and the Girls Opportunity Alliance.

Siti Aishah noted, however, that although a basic Spot education ecosystem is in place, there is limited access to children who have no personal devices or even an internet connection. Regardless, she expressed her optimism that 2021 would bring more opportunities to go into schools again, and to find new ways of getting Spot’s beneficiaries involved.

Spot also aims to expand its reach next year with programmes for secondary school students, as well as for children in rural and marginalised communities that have little to no internet access and devices, including stateless and refugee communities.
The moderator Jasmine Rajah began the Q&A session by asking if KafeTeen programmes faced any pushback from parents. Hamizah replied in the negative, saying that LPPKN seeks out opportunities to set up KafeTeen booths at community and corporate events, and tries to make these booths as interesting as possible—with games and prizes—to encourage adolescents to come forward.

She added that there are also two Transit KafeTeen centres in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya for secondary school students, which allow them to discuss CSE with their friends in a safe environment after school until their parents are able to pick them up.

Jasmine noted that she herself had attended one of Spot’s programmes, and wanted to know how it was perceived. Siti Aishah said that the response was encouraging, with many asking if more programmes were scheduled for the following month, and some children being accompanied by all of their family members to have open and respectful conversations in a safe space.

Tengku Aira Razif of UNFPA Malaysia then joined in the discussion to answer a question on solutions to manage the teenage pregnancy and baby dumping crisis. She noted that in the short term, what needs to be focused on is stigma-free frontline response from LPPKN and the Health Ministry.

Tengku Aira added that the long-term solution is CSE, and commended Spot for doing a short-term version of the long-term solution with Spot going into schools. Siti Aishah noted that Spot is complementing the work done by LPPKN, UN agencies, and frontliners. Hamizah then encouraged Siti Aishah to apply for the government’s Bantuan Khas Perbendaharaan (BKP) programme, which provides financial support to NGOs.

To a question on involving young men to reduce teenage pregnancies and baby dumping, Hamizah noted that LPPKN has developed a module on SRHR for young men aged between 16 to 24. These modules touch on responsibility for their own bodies and their partners’. Penkunas added that respectful relationships is a point that should continue to be advocated for.
KEYNOTE SESSION 3

Case Study - Families on the Edge - A perspective on the plight of Female Headed & Vulnerable Households during the Pandemic

Moderator:

Tehmina Kaoosji - Host & Emcee
Independent Broadcast Journalist & Gender Activist

Speaker:

Dr Muhammed Abdul Khalid
Managing Director & Chief Economist, DM Analytics, Malaysia

Key Takeaways -

1. The unemployment rate for female headed households in the urban poor has reached an all time low with two out of three have lower incomes now then the pre-pandemic.
2. 97% of female-headed households live below the relative poverty line of RM 3,000 monthly.
3. Providing a compulsory safety net for those in the urban poor, especially female-led households due to the lack of savings in these houses.
4. One-off payments are not as effective nor sustainable like workshops to generate skills and initial capital support for self-employment.
5. Providing resources, accessibility and stable connectivity or a different solution to enable online learning and education, that can cater to the needs of children from low income families.
7. Providing healthy and balanced meals in schools for the children in these households to avoid malnutrition.
8. Ensure children from low-income households are not left behind in education to lessen the economic impact for the future.
In his keynote speech, Dr Muhammed Abdul Khalid explained some of the findings from the *Families on the Edge* study commissioned by UNICEF and UNFPA to explore the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and children in low income urban families in Malaysia.

Muhammed stated that throughout history, crises disproportionately impact women and children, particularly those from low-income families. As such, the study looked at both well-being and financial impact, surveying 500 families or 2,800 household members, from 16 low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur.

Comparing data from May and September, the study found that recovery had been uneven and uncertain, particularly for female-headed households and those that included a person or persons with disability.

For these households, their incomes have not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Two out of three female-led households registered lower income from before the crisis, while those with persons with disability are bringing in 24 percent less.

During the MCO, the unemployment rate for female-led households was at 33 percent, compared to the national average of 5.3 percent. Muhammed added that although this has since come down to about 10 percent, it is still nearly double the national average. Additionally, 60 percent of adult children in households with persons with disability and 20 percent of those in female-led households are out of work.

Alarmingly, Muhammed noted, 97 percent of female-led households live below the relative poverty line of RM3,000 monthly. For households with persons with disability, this number goes up to 100 percent.

What contributed to these statistics is a lack of social safety nets, particularly for the self-employed. Half of the female-led households surveyed had no financial safety net such as Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF), a compulsory private sector savings plan, and even fewer had social security (SOCSO).

The study showed that the majority of households also have little savings to fall back on. The 30 percent of female-led households that had savings had saved an average of just RM342, while the even fewer households with a disability had only RM75. Those surveyed were also pessimistic about the next six months, with many anticipating even harder times.

There are two additional negative dimensions to this economic quandary—reduced interest in and access to education, as well as mental health impact.

Education—which has largely gone online due to the COVID-19 lockdowns—was impacted due to connectivity and device availability, with nine out of 10 households relying on mobile devices instead of personal computers and most having to share these with their siblings.

Given that education serves as a key enabler of upward mobility, the current limited access to online learning could potentially have a knock-on effect that could widen social inequality even further. The study also showed that one in three were very depressed, and half were very worried about issues such as access to education and being able to feed their families.

Muhammed also dispelled some prevailing narratives about these low-income households. The perception that these families are lazy is baseless, he said, as they have working hours that are longer than average in addition to unpaid care work.
Many also believe that these households are just asking and waiting for handouts. But when surveyed, many said that what they want are jobs, or assistance to restart their businesses. The perception that these low-income households have too many children was also proven wrong, with the average number of children being two.

These low-income households are not idle or irresponsible, Muhammed stressed, with most stating that they would use any assistance for the wellbeing of their children. He added that while assistance programmes like the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) cash aid of up to RM1,000 for B40 households helped, it is insufficient.

Other measures announced by the government, such as the loan repayment moratorium during lockdown are also irrelevant, since many of these households do not have loans from formal banking institutions. What those in low-income households need instead, Muhammed said, are jobs.

To a question on social protection mechanisms that would help alleviate the burden of low-income households, Muhammed said what should have been done was a measure mooted by the previous deputy prime minister, that is extending EPF and SOCSO coverage to all Malaysians, regardless of employment type.

Such a move would protect even those in informal sectors, especially when encountering financial shocks, such as the onset of the pandemic. At present, he explained, those who contribute to the SOCSO Employment Insurance System (EIS) get pay-outs for six months, but not those who are self-employed.

Kaoosji also asked what social protections can be put in place in terms of poor mental health in B40 households. Muhammed noted that this is inexorably tied to income, with many households rationing food and relying on instant noodles.

What is needed, he added, is to solve the immediate problems first. The wheel does not need to be reinvented; Malaysia can look at what other countries are doing in terms of affording their people basic protections, such as providing meals in schools.

As for the high rates of unemployment in low-income households, Muhammed noted that in the short-term, assistance must be channelled to allow the heads of these families to restart their businesses without interruption.

For the long-term, the government must ensure that children are not cut off from receiving proper quality education, as education is key for upward mobility. The current online learning model is not working, he added, as many do not have the devices to participate nor stable internet connections.
**Plenary Session 3**

**Gender equality: The role of Malaysian men and boys and the media**

**Moderator:**

- Aina Fadzil
  - Head of PR, dearher

**Speakers:**

- Zurairi A.R.
  - Assistant News Editor, Malay Mail

- Tharma Pillai
  - Co-Founder & Advocacy Director, UNDI18

- Nailah Huda
  - Broadcast Journalist, Astro Awani

- Dr. Nurul Haq Shahrir
  - UNFPA Malaysia Consultant on Religion and Interlocutor for Inter-religious Dialogue

- Rizal Rozhan
  - Organiser, Men Against Toxic Masculinity (MAT)

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**Key Takeaways -**

1. **Employment of women in different sectors of the newsroom to avoid reporting in the media with gender bias.**
2. **A majority male-led news corporation can affect hiring and organisational practices.**
3. **Major news organisations need to ensure that they have equal representation due to it being used excessively and as a reliable outlet and source, locally and internationally.**
4. **Gender Justice - equality and dignity of a human being should exist between men and women.**
5. **The media should provide a platform for reporters to challenge narratives and be more progressive.**
6. **Media personnel are entitled to be fair pay and better working conditions without having to do unpaid work.**
7. **A diversity in languages should be promoted in media to reach a wider audience, especially in Malaysia.**
8. **The media should not push for stories that can promote harmful stereotypes in the community.**
9. **Malaysia ranks at 104 out of 150 countries on the Gender Gap Index and needs to close gender gaps for gender equality.**
10. **Women make up the majority of voters but only represent 13% of government roles.**
11. **Malaysia needs to introduce a gender quota and reach at least 30% women in government.**
12. **The electoral system needs to be reviewed to create a better consensus and representation for women and girls.**
13. **Toxic masculinity is nurtured and can be broken with the with the support of men taking advantage of their decision making influences by fighting for solutions that empower women.**
14. **Malaysia needs to create more gender equal policies.**
15. **The media should evolve their gender lens and engage NGO's & subject matter experts to conduct gender sensitive workshops and training in order to create better conversations and report healthier narratives**
Zurairi AR
Assistant news editor, Malay Mail

Zurairi AR noted that the majority of Malaysian newsrooms seem to be dominated by men. In many publications, women tend to be appointed as section editors for so-called ‘soft news’ like the lifestyle and entertainment desks.

These sections, he stressed, are no less important than the news desk, but are not as influential in shaping public opinion and government policies. These sections are sometimes not even considered in decision-making for a news organisation.

Male-dominated newsrooms display a ‘boys’ club’ mentality, which are set in patriarchal gender tropes and traditions, which invariably results in gender bias. This is evident not only in sexist and demeaning headlines and misogynist handling of stories, but also in hiring practices.

The lack of female representation in newsrooms also results in misgendering of trans women, intersex and non-binary persons, there’s also a lack of awareness about how certain stories can enable and even promote physical and online Gender-Based Violence.

Zurairi highlighted several examples of this: The harassment of those who participate in the annual Women’s March, judgemental stories of women artistes who discard their hijab, or sensational coverage of prominent transgender celebrities, such as when celebrity cosmetics entrepreneur Nur Sajat went for the umrah.

Many of these issues, Zurairi added, can be nipped in the bud with a more diverse team of editors to catch instances of sexism and misogyny before publication. He stressed, however, that this does not mean men cannot do their part, since being gender-sensitive is not limited to any gender, sexuality, age, class or ethnic and religious background.

Male editors can do this by elevating women’s voices, especially when quoting newsmakers, from politicians, NGO activists, subject matter experts, analysts, to even those interviewed for vox pop segments.

In this regard, Zurairi highlighted the 5050 Malaysia initiative, which is a database of women subject matter experts that can be contacted and quoted by media, students and academics. He ended his presentation by calling on the keynote speaker Ras Adiba Radzi to inculcate gender sensitivity among her staff at Bernama, since the organisation’s stories are used extensively in many newspapers and portals.

Dr Nurul Haq Shahrir
Expert consultant on religion and interlocutor for inter-religious dialogue, UNFPA Malaysia

Dr Nurul Haq Shahrir began his presentation by explicating the term gender, which refers to the socially, economically and historically defined roles of women and men of all ages, and which vary across cultures.

As for the concept of gender justice, Nurul Haq said that it speaks to the equality and dignity of a human person. Men and women have the same dignity and equal value in the eyes of the Creator. Respect for the human person, therefore, entails respect for the rights, that are prior to society, that flow from his or her dignity as a creature.
The exercise of this equal dignity in Malaysia, Nurul Haq explained, can be translated by allowing, for example, a Malaysian woman to share the same rights as men to confer citizenship to their own children.

Malaysia, he added, can take a cue from the Al-Majallah al-Ahkam al-Adaliyyah, or civil law at the end of the Ottoman empire. In Article 52 of the Majallah, if an original ruling derived from Islamic texts—the Quran, Hadith or *ijtihad*, the exercise of a scholar—becomes inoperative, an alternative is put in its place.

If it is impossible to enforce this ruling for any reason, then an Islamic jurist or cleric is required to find an alternative ruling to implement it in place. And the jurist should issue a verdict or *fatwa* for implementing this alternative ruling in place of the original.

Applying this to Malaysian citizenship, Nurul Haq explained if the original ruling, where citizenship is passed from a father to his children, becomes impossible to enforce—because the father is unknown, stateless, or of unknown nationality, for instance—then it is appropriate include an alternative. In this case, to confer on the children their mother’s nationality.

The children, in this way, can acquire legal status, which is absolutely essential for everyone, and as Nurul Haq stressed, it is only Islamic to do so. This means that everyone must be provided with the full range of opportunities as befit their natural rights, and these rights must be protected by the government.

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**Nailah Huda**

Broadcast journalist, Astro Awani

Building on Zurairi’s presentation on editorial positions in newsrooms being dominated by men, Nailah Huda spoke from a reporter’s perspective. Change, she said, should also come from the bottom up, with reporters taking the initiative to challenge narratives with a new manner of questioning, that is more in line with the progressive ideas seen today.

Nailah explained, however, that this is not always possible as the newsrooms of today have to chase after clicks, and often sacrifice quality for quantity. Reporters are accordingly stretched too thin, having to take on an increasing number of roles, from social media to video editing, and are underpaid.

This set of circumstances does not leave room for reporters to truly understand the context and consequences of their stories. Much like anything to do with gender, she added, the issue here is structural, and always boils down to profit triumphing over social values.

Reporters should get more support, and form stronger unions to push for better working conditions and remuneration. Newsrooms too should invest in providing more training to reporters, such as by working with civil society to better understand gender-sensitive issues like sexual assault and prostitution.

Nailah added that breaking the glass ceiling by having more women in editorial positions alone is not enough to elicit change. Sometimes, this has the effect of merely placing women in existing structures built by men and for men.

She also touched on the disconnect in values and ideas between content in English and Malay. She spoke of her decision to improve her Malay to reach a larger audience. This is because she believes that there is a much more pressing
need for Malay-speaking audiences to hear the discussions and narratives that usually take place in the trope of the English-speaking ‘Bangsar bubble.’

According to Nailah, Malay-language news organisations face a lot more pressure to toe the line on certain issues, creating polarisation between the Malay and English-speaking worlds. Bridging that gap is important, as both worlds working together can advance better and healthier social values.

Nailah ended her presentation by stressing that the news is not just to inform the public of what’s going on, it is also to educate. Editors and reporters need to be better equipped, so that aside from holding them accountable when putting out stories that perpetuate dangerous gender stereotypes, it can be prevented from happening in the first place.

This takes place against the backdrop of women making up 50.58 percent of registered voters. Meaning that women are the majority of voters, but the majority of candidates are men. For parliamentary seats, this translates to 612 male to 75 female candidates. For state legislature seats, the disparity is even worse, with 1,470 male to 176 female candidates.

To remedy the situation, Tharma stated, it needs to be seen from a larger, structural perspective. One of the steps that can be taken is by introducing a gender quota, which is seen as a fast-track solution to produce the magic number of 30 percent of women in government.

Another possible route is reviewing the current first-past-the-post electoral system. Other systems, such as proportional representation, might ensure greater inclusion not only for women, but also for other underrepresented communities such as youth, Orang Asli, Indians, and more.

Tharma then outlined several initiatives Undi18 has been working on, including the 111 Initiative, a campaign to build towards 50 percent women's representation in politics. To work towards this goal, Undi18 is pushing for a women's parliamentary caucus—with the present female MPs working together to push for policies significantly impacting women, such as the Sexual Harassment Bill.

Tharma Pillai
Co-founder and advocacy director, Undi18

Speaking on the representation of women in Malaysian politics, Tharma Pillai noted that the country continues to rank poorly in global indices for gender equality. In the World Economic Forum’s global gender gap index for 2020, Malaysia placed 104 out of 150 countries.

As of 2019, there were only 33 women, or 14.9 percent, in Parliament. The ratio of women to men in Cabinet has regressed further from the Pakatan Harapan era, from the already poor 18 percent to 13 percent in the Perikatan Nasional administration.
Rizal Rozhan
Organiser, Men Against Toxic Masculinity (MAT)

Rizal Roshan’s presentation consisted of a letter he wrote to Malaysian men and boys. In it, he pleaded for them to stop idling by and merely watching women fight vigorously for gender justice in Malaysia. The issue, he said, is one that requires men to actively participate and change their ways—by becoming better men.

To do this, Rizal said, men have to shed their toxic masculine layers. He used the example of an onion—maxims such as men having to be tough, having to be macho are layers of this onion which need to be shed.

These toxic masculine traits need to be discarded to get to the centre of the onion, the heart of the male self. After this process, men can then begin to add new layers, by being kinder to themselves and others, and positively contribute back to society in terms of gender justice.

This can be done, Rizal added, with three steps. Being a better dad, being a better friend, and being a better decision-maker. Being a better dad refers to positive parenting. This will help their children, boys and girls alike, to be better, kinder and more respectful human beings.

Being a better friend entails not encouraging toxic behaviour among friends, and realising that not participating in locker-room talk has no effect on one’s manliness. This also means surrounding oneself with better quality men—those who respect others and are not afraid to be vulnerable.

As for being a better decision-maker, men already dominate decision-making spheres. They should not take advantage of this situation by perpetuating sexual violence and bullying, but rather take advantage in a way that empowers women. This means taking women’s ideas seriously, and setting up proper structures to support women’s leadership.
The moderator Aina Fadzil began the Q&A session by asking Rizal why men and boys are so reluctant to practise gender justice. Rizal replied that many men and boys suffer from having to perform masculinity, and do not have the ability to distinguish between that performance and their true selves.

Rizal also agreed with Nailah on there being a disconnect between Malay and English-speaking audiences. One of the problems with understanding masculinity, he said, is the absence of certain gender justice terminologies in Malay.

To a question on programmes or policies needed to end structural inequalities, Tharma noted that conversations need to be had on the language used in Malaysia’s legal structures, which are not gender equal.

Aside from having gender equal policies, reforms to push for greater women’s representation in certain spheres can also be carried out. He stated that Malaysia is not unfamiliar with the concept of affirmative action, such as with the New Economic Policy (NEP), and there is no reason why a similar policy cannot be enacted for increased representation of women in decision-making processes.

Nurul Haq stated that the presence of these structural inequalities is not just a gender issue, as it also touches on religious sensitivity. He noted that the punitive powers of the syariah courts are left to individual states to interpret, leading to arbitrary rulings and abuse, with women and children often becoming the victims. He pointed to the case of Rosliza Ibrahim, who was born out of wedlock to a Muslim biological father and a non-Muslim mother. Rosliza, who was registered as a Muslim at birth, is now fighting a legal battle to declare that she is not and never was a Muslim, and that the syariah courts have no jurisdiction over her.

According to Nurul Haq, the structure of the dual legal systems in the constitution does not in this case help to achieve justice, which is one of the paramount teachings of Islam. Such lacunae need to be addressed, and the Ninth Schedule of the Federal Constitution must be amended accordingly so that Islamic justice can be established.

Nurul Haq added that syariah law is meant to be the law of the land. That means it should be applied to everybody, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. But with the present structure of the constitution, syariah law can only be applied to Muslims. With this clause, he said, justice cannot be dispensed.

To a question on whether fear stops more gender-sensitive perspectives appearing in the news, Nailah stated that this would apply more to political and religious stories. There is ample room to push for more modern narratives, especially with the new wave of young journalists.

Nailah also reiterated that it largely comes down to resources spent on ensuring that journalists produce healthier narratives. Media companies must invest time and money in conducting workshops with experts on gender, such as NGOs who are more well-versed in these issues.

Aina then asked Zurairi about promoting healthy masculinity in the face of hierarchical power structures in all spheres of society. He replied saying that it allows men to use their privilege to ensure gender justice. In newsrooms in particular, men should learn how to not take up too much space—such as by endorsing ideas from female colleagues, and influencing their network to promote up-and-coming female colleagues, who may otherwise be overlooked.
The MWGF secretariat will present the 10 resolutions derived to key stakeholders within the Malaysian public and private sector. This includes the Prime Minister’s office, Parliamentary Select Committees, relevant ministries, Civil Society Organisations, state welfare departments and many more.

MWGF will also be establishing a panel of select advisors to help propel, elaborate and strategically engage stakeholders towards achieving the 10 resolutions. The advisory panel will be established and announced by the MWGF mid-year review. Together with the secretariat, the advisory panel will help to set the agenda and strategy for MWGF 2021.

**MWGF Engagements:**
From March 2021, The MWGF secretariat will be rolling out a public engagement campaign leading up to MWGF 2021 in November. Engagements will be done in partnership with various public and private stakeholders and will help to spur transformative conversations and proactive actions.

**MWGF 2021:**
The 2nd Instalment of MWGF will be in conjunction with International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (IDEVAW) and provided that social restrictions have been lifted, it is our aim to have an elaborate and impactful 3-day event.

The MWGF secretariat will be open to working and partnering with private sector partners to that are aligned to our goals of achieving SDG 5 for Malaysia.

• MWGF’s 10 resolutions to be a guideline for Malaysia to attain SDG 5.

• Engage and present findings, report & recommendations to key stakeholders and policy makers.

• Track & review progress on resolutions during MWGF mid-year review in June 2021

• MWGF 2021 to identify, engage and highlight issues and roadblocks to attaining 10 resolutions
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