



Bodily Autonomy: Ensuring Rights & Choices for Malaysia's Women and Girls

Malaysia Women & Girls Forum

2021

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ABOUT THE MALAYSIA WOMEN & GIRLS FORUM

The Malaysia Women & Girls Forum (MWGF) is an annual forum 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 women and girls in Malaysia.

The forum serves as a dedicated platform for the United Nations to collaborate and engage with a broad range of stakeholders to not only enhance knowledge and understanding of specific issues, but also identify key areas for action and coalition building.

MWGF is open to the public and features panellists and speakers from various backgrounds – academics, civil servants, lawmakers, NGO workers, youth leaders and representatives from both the public and private sector exchange ideas and discuss pressing issues that directly impact the nation's women and girls. The event is fully coordinated and executed by its own secretariat (appointed by UNFPA on behalf of the UN Gender Results Group).

This event aims to connect civil society, policy stakeholders, and members of the public. Through collaboration, these groups will be empowered to push for the advancement of necessary economic, social and political solutions so as to improve the lives of women and girls in Malaysia.

Funded and supported by the United Nations and UNFPA Malaysia, the Malaysia Women and Girls' Forum collectively amplifies, tracks and provides proactive recommendations and solutions to further the rights and well-being of women and girls in Malaysia.

PILLARS OF THE MWGF



ABOUT MWGF 2021

The Forum's second iteration, comprising three keynote and plenary sessions respectively, brought to the fore critical issues.

They include the need for more comprehensive anti-sexual harassment legislation, facilitation of access to services, normalisation of discussions surrounding bodily autonomy and sexual education, and the protection of whistleblowers who speak out on women's and child rights abuses.

Six resolutions were outlined by the Secretariat after taking into account the comments and feedback of expert panellists and moderators.

The Six Resolutions



These six resolutions embrace both the long and short term essentials needed for Malaysia's women to not only be centred in national recovery, but to also set the foundation 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 engage stakeholders to understand and dismantle roadblocks to implementation.

MWGF 2021: WHY BODILY AUTONOMY?

The theme for 2021 – Bodily Autonomy: Ensuring Rights & Choices for Women & Girls – was chosen with empowerment in mind.

The realisation and establishment of bodily autonomy on all levels including educational, social and economic serves to enhance rights of the individual. It will empower women, girls and everyone else with a firmer grasp over their rights, bodies and choices.



Taking into account the multi-faceted impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, understanding and applying the fundamentals of bodily autonomy will propel society towards ending outdated sociocultural norms and laws that enable violence against women and girls.

It is vital that all Malaysians begin to understand and apply bodily autonomy to expand their lives and worldview. Policymakers, the government, institutions and chief security officers have a leading role to play by amplifying and connecting Malaysians to the universal human right of bodily autonomy.

WELCOME ADDRESS & OPENING REMARKS

The MWFG welcome address was delivered by Karima El Korri, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Darussalam.



“It is about questioning those norms and practices that violate women and girls’ right to privacy, dignity and self-respect,”

– Karima El Korri, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Darussalam.

El Korri spoke on how gender equality was both a core human rights issue and primary driver of development performance, and central to the achievement of the SDGs in Malaysia and the world over.

“A woman’s absolute and unfettered ability to exercise control over what happens to their body is an absolute human right,” asserted El Korri, who went on to add that realizing this right and protecting autonomy was not just about securing access to health, but also about breaking down barriers that undermine the capabilities and agency of women everywhere.

El Korri added that women’s bodily autonomy was “a catalyst of educational gains, employment and social mobility” as well as protection against violence, abuse and other forms of bad treatment.

The Covid-19 pandemic has served to lay bare profound fault lines and raised fundamental questions about the status of women and girls – Malaysia must address women-centric challenges while charting its path towards a post-pandemic recovery.

These include understanding and respecting women’s bodily autonomy as a prerequisite to rebuilding and strengthening mutual respect and safety, identifying and breaking taboos, and collecting more relevant data to identify lacunae.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Malaysia Representative Dr Asa Torkelsson echoed this in her foreword, saying that while Malaysia had made tremendous advances towards the realisation of gender equality and women’s empowerment, gaps still persist.

Despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments and policymakers found themselves opportunities to seek novel ways of bridging the myriad social, legislative, logistic, behavioural and economic gaps that were laid bare as a result of it.

While many have swiftly reacted to addressing Covid-19 challenges, the shadow pandemic of increasing domestic and intimate-partner violence, online gender-based violence and sexual harassment has seen less attention.

UNFPA reasserted its willingness to work towards empowering youth with the knowledge and language to stand and speak up for their rights, including ensuring access to scientifically accurate, age-appropriate, human rights-based information about sexual and reproductive health.

Women and girls who are able to fully exercise their bodily autonomy and full potential will better contribute to national development, including bringing the effort and energy to Malaysia’s pandemic recovery in the years to come – thereby helping to *Build Forward, Better*.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: YB KHAIRY JAMALUDDIN, MINISTER OF HEALTH, MALAYSIA

In his keynote address, YB Khairy thanked the United Nations in Malaysia, UNFPA and the MWGF Secretariat for developing and organising a solution-based forum.

The lawmaker noted that any nation cannot advance or progress without the full participation of its female population, and so all social, legal, economic and healthcare impediments must be removed to facilitate full engagement and involvement.



Admittedly, Malaysia has seen some of its hardest moments in history over the past two years with unprecedented pandemic-driven calamities and challenges creating cascading difficulties for everyone.

Particularly, women and children have been disproportionately impacted. Violence against women during the pandemic increased, as did revelations of period poverty and online harassment as well as mental health crises.

However, despite incredible adversity, amazing acts and feats of heroism and selflessness were shown by women and girls.

The Health Minister added that Malaysia had made incredible strides over the past 50 years in healthcare for women and girls, with the maternal mortality rate dropping to 23.5 per 100,000 live births in 2018 from 56.4 per 100,000 live births in 1980.

Safe delivery by skilled birth attendants increased from 38% to 99% in the same period, while new HIV cases reduced to 9.3 cases per 100,000 of the population in 2020. The HIV vertical transmission rate from mother to child maintained below two per cent.

During the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out, the *Ibunisasi* campaign – which kicked off in June 2021 – catered solely to pregnant and nursing mothers and was the first of its kind in the world.

Khairy highlighted that violence against women was a health issue as it was not just a violation of bodily integrity but also of sexual and reproductive health rights. He noted that abused women were more likely than non-abused women to engage in high-risk behaviours such as substance abuse.

He underscored Malaysia's commitment to upholding the human rights of its citizens, pointing out that the country was signatory to the International Conference on Population Development (ICPD) and the resulting Programme of Action in 1994, which ensures the reproductive rights and choices of women and girls. The nation is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The lawmaker also expressed the importance of devising solution-based platforms that would work in tandem with the government's policy of elevating the safety and well-being of women and girls.

PLENARY SESSION 1: BODILY AUTONOMY AS A PILLAR OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Understanding the Challenges of Achieving and Embedding Bodily Autonomy in Malaysia as an Accelerator Towards Achieving Gender Equality



Moderator

Tehmina Kaoosji

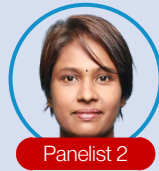
MWGF Head of Secretariat, Independent Broadcast Journalist & Gender Activist



Panelist 1

YB Fuziah Salleh

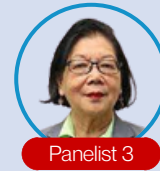
Member of Parliament for Kuantan & Member of Parliamentary Select Committee for Women, Children & Social Development Issues



Panelist 2

Dr Senutha Poopale Rattinan

Deputy Undersecretary, Policy & Strategic Planning Division, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM)



Panelist 3

Datuk Dr Narimah Awin

Former Chairperson of National Population & Family Health Development Malaysia (LPPKN), Former Director, Family Health Development Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia & Former Regional Adviser, Maternal and Reproductive Health, World Health Organisation (WHO)



Panelist 4

Ong Bee Leng

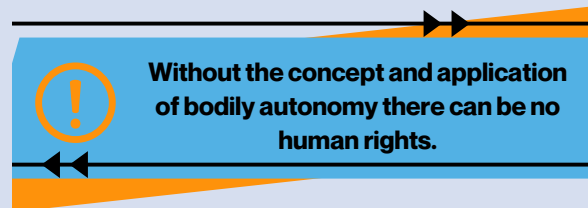
Chief Executive Officer, Penang Women's Development Corporation (PWDC)



Panelist 5

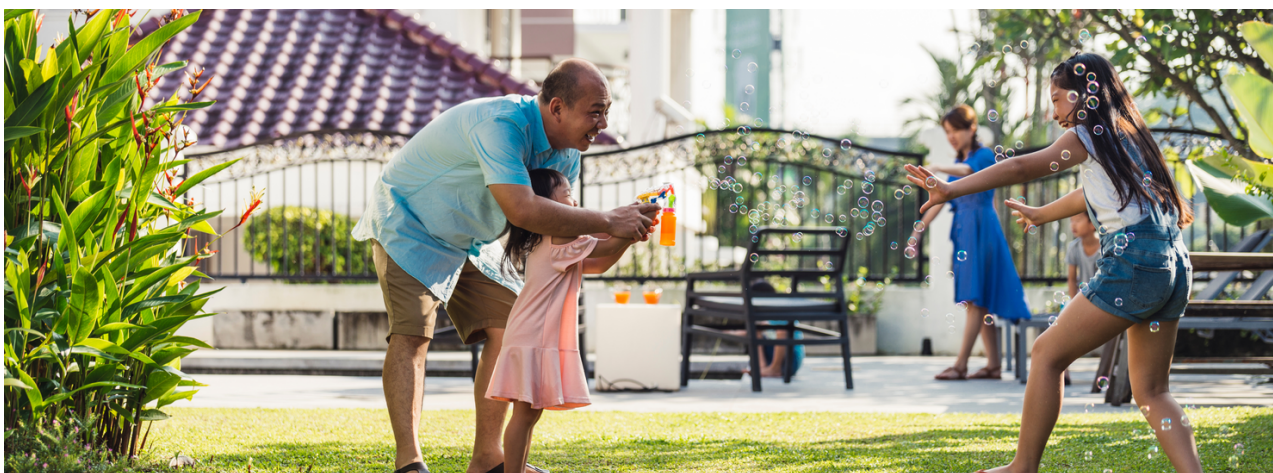
Zarizana Abdul Aziz

Human Rights Lawyer & Co-founder of Due Diligence Project (DDP)



In this session, the knowledge, application and legality regarding bodily autonomy of Malaysia was explored against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. YB Fuziah Salleh began with outlining how bodily autonomy was partially addressed in the 2022 Budget, which saw 100 additional officers assigned to the Royal Malaysian Police Sexual, Women and Child Investigation Division.

She also highlighted the RM30 million budget allocation for daycare centres following suggestions by the Gender Budget Group, a CSO coalition spearheaded by ENGENDER Consultancy and the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO). These were responses to the needs of women who are survivors of domestic violence as well as women in the workforce.



Better Legal Frameworks

Meanwhile, Dr Senutha Poopale Ratthinan discussed the need for a solid legal framework and policies to facilitate the advancement and empowerment of women and girls.

She discussed the government's proposed national reproductive and social health education policy to increase knowledge, formulated based on four main aspects: advocacy, human capital development, research and development, and monitoring and evaluation.

Meanwhile, in efforts to address gaps in knowledge, the National Population and Family Development Board (under the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry) currently runs a dedicated portal to provide accurate, comprehensive and effective sex education materials.

Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH)

Datuk Dr Narimah Awin raised the importance of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights rather than mere awareness.

Malaysia has been relatively successful in enabling this access (as up to 95% of the population live within 5 km of a health facility).

However, three key delays often occur when seeking assistance in the case of gender-based violence:

1. Awareness of the services available;
2. Access to those services;
3. Motivation to address their health needs

Dr Narimah said that while Malaysia had less issue with the first and second forms of delays, there is much to improve upon in the third.

She provided an example of one of her visits to Kapit, Sarawak, which took her days to reach. While building a clinic was not cost-effective, a mobile 'flying doctor' service was implemented.

Dr Narimah said that during her time as the Health Ministry's family health development director, most of the division's budget went into renting helicopters to fly doctors, medical assistants and nurses to the interior anywhere between monthly to weekly.

She ended her presentation by saying that although awareness was the first step in realising sexual health and reproductive rights, it alone was not sufficient: an individual must also be able to use the service and be motivated to use it.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Ong Bee Leng then turned the discussion to public awareness of violence against women and girls, pointing at the 'Penang Goes Orange' state-level campaign which involves the state government and agencies, non-governmental organisations and education institutions in raising public awareness of the need to nip violence against women and girls in the bud.

Ong explained that domestic violence was not just a 'family' issue as it involved public health and a public support system must be in place to support victims, such as Penang's First Support Point initiative under its Safe Family Policy introduced in 2020.

Under this programme, all constituencies have service centres with trained staff to support domestic violence victims, Ong said, adding that non-governmental and religious organisations also had the same capacity, sans counselling.

Lack of Gender Responsiveness

However, the Budget was still not gender-responsive: Malaysia relies on outcome-based budgeting hinging on pre-Budget analyses carried out by individual ministries. Although a gender responsive budgeting manual was introduced in 2005 and the government has acknowledged that it has data management issues, there are still gaps.

Gender and age disaggregated data are still lacking, making it difficult for elected representatives to reach out to those in need. During the coronavirus pandemic, Fuziah had to reach out to five different government offices for data on female-led households in her constituency as there is no “one-stop centre” that holds all relevant information.

Without well-managed data it is impossible to formulate an accurate pre-budget analysis and so the government will not be able to formulate proper responsive policies. This has the knock-on effect of impacting legislative implementation: even if gender equality laws were passed, a gender-responsive budget could not be effectively implemented in the current climate.

On a positive note, RM15 million was set aside for data management in the 2022 Budget, which could result in more evidence-based planning.

Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill

Dr Senutha also discussed the Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill which was tabled for its first reading in December 2021 following years of negotiations, consultations and surveys with stakeholders from academia, government agencies and non-governmental organisations.

The proposed legislation provides for an Anti-Sexual Harassment Tribunal with the jurisdiction to hear and rule on sexual harassment complaints made by any individual regardless of age, gender and nationality, and whether the alleged offense occurred at a workplace or anywhere else.

The Bill also states that compensation will be in the form of suitable remedies, with Dr Senutha describing the proposed legislation as “survivor-centric” and an important manifestation of tackling sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence.

Now that the Bill has been tabled despite much external pressure, all quarters must work together to ensure its successful implementation once passed by Parliament.

Moral Policing, Domestic Violence, and Bodily Autonomy

Winding up the discussion, Zarizana Abdul Aziz spotlights the importance of positive messaging about bodily autonomy and associating a woman or girl’s body with dignity. To create positive messaging, the narrative needs to move away from the contestation of and control over a girl’s body.

Moral policing and making girls feel a certain way about their body and sexuality – while simultaneously giving boys more freedom to express bodily integrity – will only serve to restrict girls’ growing awareness of their body.

Both girls and boys are also not taught about healthy and respectful relationships, and efforts to do so at schools during her tenure with the Women’s Centre for Change saw unease, with some educators being uncomfortable with discussing such topics.

Zarizana said despite the existence of laws such as the Domestic Violence Act 1994, societal attitudes towards domestic violence remain unchanged. Research has time and again shown that Malaysians think domestic violence is, at times, justifiable: an attitude shared even among enforcement officers.

The normalisation of violence along with moral policing and victim blaming must be eradicated as it prevents women from coming forward to report the violence perpetrated against them.

This normalisation also causes women to doubt whether society will support them and the judicial system will provide justice. Oftentimes, women do not report violence against them as they lack confidence in police and the judiciary.

Zarizana emphasised that positive messaging about bodily autonomy, dignity and respectful relationships ought to be championed – society needs to change its mindset and, accordingly, its behaviour.

Q&A: Plenary Session 1

During the Q&A round, moderator Tehmina Kaoosji asked panellists for recommendations for Malaysia's short-term plans for achieving SDG5 by 2030, with a focus on women and girls' bodily autonomy.

According to Dr Senutha, an ideal short-term plan would be to ensure the **successful implementation of anti-sexual harassment laws** that will provide a practical foundation for drafting a gender equality bill in future and uphold women and girls' rights.

Fuziah pointed out that while Malaysia is doing alright in terms of education and healthcare concerning women, women continue to be underrepresented in the workplace as well as in policy making roles.



Equal work, equal pay and flexible hours should be developed, and political will is needed to improve the situation.

– YB Fuziah Salleh, Member of Parliament for Kuantan & Member of Parliamentary Select Committee for Women, Children & Social Development Issues

Ong Bee Leng suggested encouraging women to become involved in politics as currently only 10.7% of women in Malaysia are involved in this arena, a mutual and collective effort from all sectors of society to break gender stereotypes, and putting in place an upstream approach to educate children about their bodies, 'safe touches' and even sex.

Addressing the topic of sociocultural norms, Zarizana Abdul Aziz noted that society placed undue pressure on women who were forced to adopt the 'double burden' of economic work and care work, and for gender equality to be realised in the community the changing of mindsets and transforming of behaviours must occur.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: PLENARY SESSION 1

01

Legislation

Malaysia must draft, pass and implement more comprehensive laws addressing violence against women and enshrining gender equality.

02

Budget

The yearly federal Budget must be gender-responsive.

03

Policymaking

State data collection must be gender disaggregated to effectively assess the impact of policy measures.

KEYNOTE SESSION 2: COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION (CSE) AND BODILY AUTONOMY

Understanding the Challenges of Achieving and Embedding Bodily Autonomy in Malaysia as an Accelerator Towards Achieving Gender Equality



Moderator

**Ain Husniza
Saiful Nizam**

Student Activist



Panelist 1

**Siti Aishah
Hassan Hasri**

Founder of Spot (Soroptimist
Puberty Organising Toolkit)
Community Programme

Using carefully-designed modules that take into account age, development stages and cultural sensitivities, Siti Aishah's Spot programme aims to equip children aged nine to 14 with the confidence and resilience to make informed decisions regarding mental and physical health and wellbeing.

The crux of this programme is to let girls know that they are in control of their own bodies, and that there is no shame in anything about how their bodies work, said Siti Aishah during her keynote.

In her research, Siti Aishah found that there was a high prevalence of 'dangerous' attitudes around reproduction and sexual behaviour. Many children in low-cost flats she surveyed were also left alone as both parents worked, raising the risk of negative influences. To combat this she developed the modules that would later become the cornerstones of the Spot programme: topics such as hygiene management, menstruation, mental health, puberty, sex, consent and communication.

The primary goal is for girls to be able to carry themselves with dignity, secure in the knowledge that they have the right to their body and personal space. Since its founding in 2015, Spot has educated 14,824 children, trained 359 volunteers, and visited 110 schools.

Given the lack of readily available high-quality sex and relationship education programmes, children can be vulnerable to harmful sexual behaviours and exploitation which will be fundamentally detrimental to the growth of the nation.

Expanding on Siti Aishah's keynote, Ain Husniza asked about rape jokes in schools and how they violated bodily autonomy. The pair explored how rape jokes normalised sexual violence and violation of consent as 'funny, permissible and inevitable' and created an unsafe environment.

Siti Aishah discussed cases of sexual assault, bullying and period poverty she had encountered during her advocacy work, and the importance of sexual education.

She highlighted that failure to provide comprehensive sexual education can result in (preventable) tragedies: underage or unplanned pregnancies, baby dumping, infanticide, mental health ramifications and decreased quality of life.

Movements like #MakeSchoolASaferPlace hinges on a fundamental respect for bodily autonomy, along with acceptance and understanding for the lived experiences of others, across gender, ethnic, religious, and religious lines.

Upholding bodily autonomy is central to the success of these movements as it signifies that society has pushed back against the assault of women and girls. Challenging extant norms and building new ones are part of progress, particularly in course-correcting patriarchal pathways and ending vulnerability to violence.

PLENARY SESSION 2: UNDERSTANDING BODILY AUTONOMY AS A BASIS TO END VAWG

Perspectives from Civil Society



Moderator

YB Nurul Izzah

Member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh



Panelist 1

Nisha Sabanayagam

Executive Director, All Women's Action Society (AWAM)



Panelist 2

Sumitra Visvanathan

Executive Director, Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)



Panelist 3

Karen Lai

Programme Director, Women's Centre for Change (WCC)



Panelist 4

Dr Lai Suat Yan

Senior Lecturer, Gender Studies Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya

Upholding bodily autonomy has the ultimate end of reducing all forms of violence against women across social, pedagogical, faith-based, political and domestic arenas. However, with the pandemic resulting in an increase of all forms of gender-based violence, it is vital to address causes through a grassroots approach by engaging with civil society organisations and taking on their perspectives and recommendations.

Malaysian Attitudes Towards Women

In her segment, Sumitra Visvanathan shares recent WAO survey findings that revealed in the context of rape, a shocking 73 % of respondents believed that "women say no when they actually mean yes" and 50 % believe that women are raped because of how they act and dress.

This finding, she said, illustrated how conversations around women and girls' bodily autonomy and rights had to begin at the baseline of what Malaysians fundamentally believed about gender equality and violence against women. In the WAO survey aimed at doing just this, results were worrying.

Further, the pandemic has exacerbated and emphasised gender gaps in a wide array of areas including gender-based violence, women's employment, sexual and reproductive health rights and child rights.

From March 2020 to the end of 2021 and over the course of several cordon sanitaire (known as MCO), WAO addressed approximately 15,000 cases of violence against women and girls – a marked increase driven mainly by an attitude that endorses violence and disrespect for bodily autonomy.

Attitudes that excuse, justify, minimise or trivialise physical, sexual or other forms of violence against women, or blame or hold women at least partly responsible for the violence must be addressed, particularly coming from influential individuals such as ministers or community leaders as these people heavily contribute towards creating a culture of acceptance.

The Malaysian Public Attitudes and Perceptions towards Violence against Women survey indicated that while half of Malaysians are likely to oppose violence-endorsing attitudes and support gender equality, there was also a disconnect between knowledge and practice as respondents were able to recognise violence but will likely excuse the perpetrator and/or normalise violence.

Over half of respondents (53 %) believed domestic violence was a normal reaction to everyday stress and frustration, while 83 % answered that rape happens because men are unable to control their sexual desires.

Malaysian Attitudes Towards Women (con't)

The survey showed that Malaysians tend to deny that gender inequality was an issue, with some stating that women exaggerated how unequally they are treated and wrongly interpret “innocent” actions and words as sexist.

Malaysians also tend to undermine women in daily life, with 80 % of respondents believing that men should control the relationship and become head of the family, and 85 % believing that women prefer a man to ‘be in charge’ of a relationship.

Promisingly, 70.3 % of respondents oppose child marriage: a signal, perhaps, that many are not far from extending this awareness to recognising that a woman has autonomy over her own body.

Egregious Violations Against Children in Local Schools

Nisha Sabanayagam noted that in 2020 there was a spike in sexual harassment cases they handled, particularly online. This and the next year saw worrying incidents indicating an overall worsening environment for women and girls.

Examples included the suicide of two young women following cyberbullying, misogynistic Telegram groups that exchanged non-consensual intimate images, and the widespread vitriol directed towards Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam after she started conversations regarding the rampant rape culture in Malaysian schools.

In a collaboration with Save the Schools MY, AWAM conducted a simple survey for children to talk about abuse and harassment in schools. The survey saw 1,495 respondents who primarily spoke about involving sexual harassment and period spot checks nationwide. Almost 80 % of the violations involved child survivors (under 17), mostly female.

The data collection showed that 41 % of perpetrators were authoritative figures and 87 % are men. More than 80 % of sexual harassment violations in schools were not disclosed or reported when they happened, possibly due to the lack of a safe atmosphere for students when reporting such violations.

Respondents reported teachers groping them to ensure they were wearing a menstrual pad, with some saying teachers would touch them inside their underwear. Almost 80 % of period spot check violations involved those under 17.

The survey shows that 72 % of perpetrators were authority figures, primarily female teachers. Fewer than seven per cent of survivors disclosed or reported the violations, with those who did threatened with expulsion.

Another survey co-conducted by AWAM on sexual harassment with a sample size of 1,000 women respondents showed that 25 % of women have been followed home once, 37 % feel unsafe when treated by a male doctor, 41 % have received unwanted sexual harassment messages on social media, 57 % have experienced unwanted touching, 57 % have been verbally sexually harassed when walking home and 68 % feel unsafe when driving home alone at night.

These results, said Nisha, further illustrated that domestic violence and sexual harassment were realities of life.

Exacerbated Gender Inequality During the Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic also compounded existing gender inequality issues, said Karen Lai, adding that her Centre saw a marked increase in domestic violence and a rise in the risk of child sex abuse cases during the various lockdowns.

The pandemic increased the risk of child abuse as children are not able to seek help or physically contact someone, like a friend or teacher, about the abuse. The shutdown or slowdown of the justice system also saw delays in accessing remedies.

On a more positive note, however, Lai noted that there had been an increase in the number of sexual crime conviction rates in courts in Penang: when victims received support and were accompanied to court, the number of sexual crime convictions significantly increased, standing at 30 % in the period of 2015-2019. compared with four per cent in the period of 2005-2007.

Although civil society organisations effectively raise awareness on various issues, a national policy is needed to address the violation of bodily autonomy in schools, said Dr Lai Suat Yan.

Dr Lai Suat Yan added that change can come through more women in policymaking as women lawmakers are more responsive to gender-based violence issues and knowledgeable about the needs of women and their families – although Malaysia still lags in representation.

Q&A: Plenary Session 2

Moderator YB Nurul Izzah Anwar kicked off the Q&A by asking Sumitra and Nisha to weigh in on the long-awaited Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill. According to both activists, while the tabling of the draft law is a certain victory there are still gaps in the law: it does not address organisational duty of care.

Nisha stated that civil society wants organisations in both the public and private sectors to have a legal obligation to address and manage sexual harassment cases.

Sumitra suggests three key amendments to the draft law, all of which hinge on the need for the latter to be more survivor-centric:

1. The inclusion of a comprehensive definition of sexual harassment, along the lines of “sexual harassment means any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature in any form including verbal, non-verbal, visual, gestural or physical against another person that reasonably causes offense, humiliation, threat to the well-being or creates an intimidating, offensive or hostile environment”;
2. The inclusion of a more robust tribunal. Though the Bill includes a tribunal mechanism, it needs one that receives and investigates sexual harassment complaints in an affordable and swift manner, protects the survivor’s privacy, protects the survivor against further victimisation and addresses the survivor’s needs via a range of remedies;
3. The Bill must mandate a commitment by public and private organisations to address and prevent sexual harassment cases, and create awareness via anti-sexual harassment policies, training and redress mechanisms.

Q&A: Plenary Session 2 (con't)

Nurul Izzah then asked Karen Lai to talk about Penang's Top-Up Women-Only Additional Seats (TWOAS) initiative, which aims to increase the number of female assemblymen to 30. These representatives will be chosen via nomination and will hold non-constituency seats, meaning they will work only on issue-based portfolios. When women are put in decision-making positions, more attention is given to gender issues.

The panellists also discussed the need for children to learn about bodily autonomy at a young age, as well as the importance of training enforcement personnel in charge of sexual harassment cases to handle difficult cases. It is important to train officers to have a gender-sensitive perspective and avoid language or lines of questioning that could be perceived as victim-blaming.

This training should also be given to teachers and educational counsellors as they too must be trained to recognise rape culture and sexual harassment in schools. A more robust complaints system that protects whistle-blowers must also be implemented.

Moderator Nurul Izzah pointed out that to properly and effectively eradicate gender-based violence, a "whole-of-society approach" is required that sees all sectors support survivors and create a culture of zero tolerance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: PLENARY SESSION 2

01

Education

Rape culture in schools must be swiftly addressed, with awareness of bodily autonomy being taught at an early age.

02

Policymaking

More women are needed in policymaking spaces and violence-endorsing attitudes from influential individuals such as politicians must stop.

03

Laws

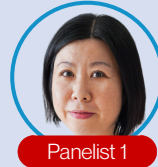
The Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill must include a comprehensive definition of what constitutes harassment as well as institute an effective tribunal system and place a duty of care at the feet of organisations.

KEYNOTE SESSION 3: BODILY AUTONOMY – THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN MALAYSIA



**Tehmina
Kaosji**

MWGF Head of Secretariat,
Independent Broadcast
Journalist & Gender Activist



**Dr Melissa
Yoong**

Asst Professor in Sociolinguistics
& Discourse Analysis, University
of Nottingham Malaysia

The media influences behaviours towards a host of issues, and gender rights is no exception. As attitudes shift, media companies and social media are coming under increased scrutiny for sensationalist and unfair depictions of women and girls.

Addressing this, Dr Melissa Yoong said that permissive attitudes towards sexual jokes and the demeaning of women in media contribute to structural gender inequality and pose a genuine danger to women and girls.

Social media and news headlines increasingly call for feminism and empowerment, said Melissa, but the media was still far from feminist. While overt sexism was stigmatised, indirect sexism had developed in the media landscape that succeeded in keeping outdated ideas alive while avoiding direct responsibility.

These included ‘complimentary’ language about a woman’s appearance, upholding ideals of femininity, and a deference to men that contribute to holding up the ‘invisible barrier’ that prevent women from participating in their fields on equal terms.



“Women remain as sexual ‘objects’ rather than subjects, stripping them of autonomy. ‘Ironic’ usage of sexism that rebrands itself as a harmless joke is also prevalent, with people not understanding the full extent of the dehumanisation inherent in this brand of humour.”

– **Dr Melissa Yoong, Asst Professor in Sociolinguistics & Discourse Analysis, University of Nottingham Malaysia**

This form of ‘humour’ also strengthens patriarchal ties between men, further reinforcing heterosexist norms and further objectifies women, maintaining structural gender inequality.

Sexism in media can also be perpetuated through normative and socially-accepted discourse, such as positioning mothers as main caregivers/parents and fathers as ‘part-time’: the burden of gender roles and family care are continually placed on the shoulders of women while men are given a pass.

Women are portrayed as workers while men are seen as 'breadwinners' – a term that comes loaded with duty, obligation and gravitas and normalises the idea that men are the head of households.

To address these shortcomings, critical self-scrutiny is required on the part of the media. Analysis of larger problems and the rights landscape must be considered, and there must be changes within the leadership and culture of the industry. Gender training could help media practitioners with self-reflection, as well as special care taken when making linguistic choices.

During the discussion session, Melissa and Tehmina discussed the hallmarks of gender progressive journalism: a form of reporting that analyses trends, offers solutions and disrupts the status quo.

Melissa pointed out that reports on violence against women, particularly during the pandemic, focused heavily on the survivor rather than the perpetrator. This reframed the issue as a 'woman's issue', which had the effect of removing the cause from the matter as well as potentially creating victim-blaming attitudes.

Tehmina also pointed out the connotational implications when using the passive voice in headlines viz. "a woman who was raped" and "a man who raped".

Tehmina and Melissa also discussed the lack of female leadership in newsrooms and how this impacted news reporting. According to statistics from Reuters Institute, across 240 major news outlets, only 22 % of top editors were women.

This, noted Tehmina, was a major contributor to patriarchal stereotypes perpetuated in the media and was at odds with the ethical role and responsibility of the Fourth Estate.

PLENARY SESSION 3: BODILY AUTONOMY – THE YOUTH & SOCIAL NARRATIVE



Moderator

Dr Fatimah Al-Attas

Senior Lecturer,
Department of Sociology
& Anthropology, Islamic
International University
Malaysia



Panelist 1

Firzana Redzuan

Founder, Monsters
Among Us



Panelist 2

Kimberley Tan

Committee Member,
Sarawak Women for
Women Society



Panelist 3

Nadira Ilana

Independent Filmmaker,
Film Programmer & Writer



Panelist 4

Hadi Azmi

Independent Journalist

Despite the ongoing pandemic, Malaysia's youth continued speaking out during the various lockdowns. Using digital spaces they pushed back and served as a collective conscience throughout various struggles and injustices.

In this segment, panellists examined issues that particularly impacted youths during the pandemic such as period spot checks, rape culture in schools, sexual harassment and child sexual abuse and grooming.

Firzana opened by discussing the importance of educating children about security and safety when embracing autonomy, including in online spaces.

Kimberley talked about the role of youth-led NGOs in protecting survivors of sexual harassment and violence and ending the culture of victim-blaming. These efforts should be localised to communities as well as nationwide so that all survivors feel they have access to a safe space.

Journalist Hadi touched on how harmful cultural norms were being actively challenged and dismantled, but certain sectors – including the media – were still struggling to adapt to “new realities” both in terms of updating regulations as well as ethical practices.

Building on this, Nadira mentioned the portrayal of women in fictional media: mainstream films used women as plot devices rather than fleshed-out characters.

“Women only appear in gangster films as somebody to be murdered or sexualised or further the plot of the male main character” she noted.

However, younger filmmakers are now focusing on diversity and improving the industry – although it is still a very male-dominated space, more young women filmmakers are emerging to tell their stories and end the cycle of patriarchal storytelling.

Q&A: Plenary Session 3

Dr Fatimah kicked off the discussion by engaging Firzana on ways society can support child survivor experiences, and the importance of early awareness of bodily autonomy. Children are often unaware of what constitutes 'abuse', meaning that parents and caregivers are not effectively communicating with their children to talk about safe and unsafe experiences.



“Going to the police is not a full stop – It is the opening of the book.”

– **Firzana Redzuan, Founder, Monsters Among Us**

Further, many children do not come forward because of the fraught nature of the justice process. Inculcating more empathy within society – particularly when dealing with survivors, even those who wish not to make official reports – will be beneficial in creating safe spaces for children to speak up.

It is never too early to engage with children on bodily autonomy and their rights over their body. Practical ways of empowering children are to prove it to them: allow them to make decisions over how they feel, whether they consent to photos, whether they wish to hug relatives. Stronger child protection policies were also necessary within industries, sectors and organisations.

Kimberley then spoke on victim-blaming, saying that it was attributable to the patriarchy embedded in Malaysia's social language.

“The glamourisation of sexual violence... ends up creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety”

– **Kimberley Tan, Sarawak Women for Women Society**



Casual victim-blaming – thoughts such as “I would have been more careful” are also prevalent, and while it is common these views must still be critically interrogated.

Following this, Hadi talked about the role of stereotypes in advertising and promotional content and how, while it had detrimental effects, the key change point would be that of society. “Advertising follows what society does best, it is a cycle,” he noted.

Hadi also spoke about the romanticisation of sexual assault in mainstream film, and addressed the trope of women being used as plot devices to “save” unruly men and cause them to return to a “proper” path. These storylines only serve to perpetuate gender inequality.

Representation of women in Malaysian cinema, said Nadira, lacked diversity. Rape culture excessively permeates local films in response to the stigmatisation of sex as taboo.

Nadira also raised the point of whether local talents were empowered to push back against such plots and demand less problematic story arcs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: PLENARY SESSION 3

01

Education

Education on bodily autonomy must begin early to empower children.

02

The Media

The media must work to use ethical and gender-sensitive values in reporting.

03

Consumer Media

Mainstream cinema must move away from tropes that normalise sexual assault and gender inequality.

04

Society

Addressing victim-blaming requires cultural shifts on both a national and community level.