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BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



THE MALAYSIA WOMEN AND GIRLS FORUM

REPORT

Women & Nation-Building

The Foundation for Diversity,
Equity and Inclusion

December 12th, 2024

Nexus Bangsar South, Kuala
Lumpur, Malaysia



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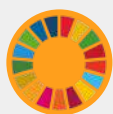
About MWGF

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, nongovernmental, 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).



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.



Building towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)



Attaining Gender Equality



Ending Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices



Ending Unmet Need for Family Planning



Ending Preventable Maternal Death



Attaining Full Potential of Young People



Summary

The Malaysia Women and Girls Forum 2024 brought together activists, artists, politicians, professors, lawyers, journalists, corporate leaders and more to discuss how women's role in nation-building can be enhanced.

This is in line with **Goal 5 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals: achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.**

Across all keynote speeches and plenary discussions, it was evident that **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) can only be achieved if women have equal agency as men in both public and private life.**

For women to have equal agency, reasons causing women to be under-represented in politics, corporate boardrooms and all levels of leadership need to be addressed. Rigid societal norms whereby women must bear the burden of unpaid caregiving work and household responsibilities need to be shattered and replaced with the expectation that such responsibilities are to be shared with men.

Gender equitable policies like equal parental leave, equal flexible working arrangements and childcare facilities at more workplaces will further encourage more women to participate in public life. Women will also benefit from more mentorship and capacity building programmes and more people advocating for women in leadership roles.

Significant legal and political barriers to gender equality remain, and those in positions of power must use their platform to push for an end to child marriage and other discriminatory practices.

Remaining quiet will simply perpetuate injustice.

Resolutions

1 Equal agency in nation building

Improve female representation and participation in politics and public life to ensure women have **equal agency** as men in deciding the policies that shape the country's future.

2 Targeting barriers

Address obstacles hampering women's participation in nation-building by **targeting structural, cultural and legal barriers** like unequal parental leave, the burden of unpaid care work and poverty-driven child marriages.

3 Intentional capacity building

Develop female leaders in political, community and corporate spaces through intentional and sustained **capacity-building**.

4 Apply intersectional lens

Apply an **intersectional lens** considering gender, different abilities, ethnicity, age and class in policy making.

5 Continued advocacy and concerted effort

Encourage multiple sectors of society to **continue advocating boldly** against laws that perpetuate gender inequality and towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).

6 Normalise shared responsibilities

Normalise shared responsibilities between **women and men** in both private and public spheres, especially in performing care duties and pushing for gender-equitable policies.



Welcome Remarks

Dr Julitta Onabanjo ● UNFPA Malaysia Representative
and Country Director Thailand

Esteemed speakers, panelists, moderators, distinguished guests, members of the media, I wish you all a very good morning. It gives me great pleasure on behalf of UNFPA Malaysia to warmly welcome you all to the fourth edition of the Malaysian Women and Girls Forum. I am particularly excited because this is my first MWGF. The Secretariat of the Forum has been hard at work putting together an amazing programme with exceptional speakers. Thank you to all the organisers.

Allow me to begin my brief welcome remarks with a quote by the late Tun Fatimah Hashim - may her soul rest in peace. Tun Fatimah Hashim was Malaysia's first female Minister, a role she took on as Minister of General Welfare back in 1969. Tun Fatimah Hashim said, and I quote "Social Justice is our Struggle. Just Allocation of Wages is our wish. We should defend the social status of women and the nobility of her character. This is our Responsibility!"

Distinguished audience, Malaysia has come a long way, in defending social justice, elevating the status of women and guaranteeing human rights of all its peoples, and Malaysian women's contribution to this, past and present, has brought significant impact to where we are today.

For this we honour and pay tribute to many Malaysian women from all walks of life, who have and continue to chart the way forward. The aspirations of Malaysia's future – a vision of shared prosperity, a future of inclusive and sustainable development – requires that we continue to guarantee human rights and social justice including ensuring increased women's participation and leadership.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge Minister YB Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri as a formidable nation builder and champion for gender equality, women's full and equitable participation and female empowerment. And while she is not able to be with us today, I am confident her driving force will be felt.

Excellencies, distinguished audience, the Malaysia Women and Girls Forum is built to support the advancement of women in Malaysia. It is an annual event that brings together a wide array of stakeholders involved in the social, economic and political development of women and girls in Malaysia.

Our objective is simple: to be an annual platform that fosters impactful dialogue, connections and conversations between public, civil society and policy stakeholders, and puts forward transformative social, economic and political actions for the advancement of Malaysia's women and girls. I am informed that today's MWGF is the largest one yet since it started mid-COVID lockdown in 2020. And this year's programme will feature a special high-level panel alongside our other esteemed panelists.



Distinguished guests, this year's theme, "Women and Nation Building: the Foundation for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion", recognises the critical role Malaysian women and girls play in the country's development and its journey to high income status. To this end, harnessing the full potential and talent of half of Malaysia's population is a fundamental imperative. And this requires lifting all barriers to their equitable economic and political participation.

With the Sustainable Development Goals now just 6 years away, and the government defining its 13th Malaysia Plan, it is more urgent than ever for the country to address the issue of women's socioeconomic parity and representation in ensuring no one is left behind. For a society to be truly inclusive, both men and women should have equal agency and say in how the country's future is shaped. Yet we know that there are still significant hurdles to overcome to achieve gender equality including parity in political and economic participation.

Persistent harmful social norms, insidious discrimination, and the perpetuation of unhelpful and regressive stereotypes have prevented women from developing skills and talents and have kept women from among others being hired for jobs or appointed as leaders at work and in politics. Further, unless we squarely address equality in legislation and governance; the burden of unpaid care work that often falls on the shoulders and backs of women; ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health; eliminating violence against women and children; we would not be able to increase women's representation in key areas of nation building.

Excellencies, distinguished guests, since our establishment in 1969, and our 51-year presence in Malaysia, as part of a vibrant UN Development System in Malaysia, UNFPA has been partnering with the government and others to tackle the root causes that prevent women and girls from unleashing their full potential as equal contributors in nation building. We reaffirm our full commitment and cooperation to the common goal of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Uplifting women and girls is key to sustainably navigating the intersecting and unprecedented challenges we face today. Women's presence, voice and perspectives must be heard, celebrated, and reflected in policy and systems of governance - in line with Malaysia's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. Because we firmly believe when women move forward, no one is left behind.

Allow me to end, by thanking everyone here for joining us today and again a special thanks and appreciation to all those that have worked to get us to today's Forum especially my UNFPA team, the MWGF Secretariat and Producers – The Big Picture (TBP), our media partners FMT and Astro Awani - and the colleagues in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

I am confident that the discussions we will have, at this critical moment, will add to the renewed impetus for accelerated and lasting transformation we so need. And it must. As late Minister Tun Fatimah Hashim said "this is our struggle, this is our wish, this is our responsibility, and as citizens of the World – this is our obligation".

Thank you.



Opening Address

Karima El Korri ● UN Resident Coordinator for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam

Good morning. It is my pleasure to join my voice to Dr Julitta's and welcome you to the 4th Malaysian Women and Girls Forum, organised under the theme "Women and Nation Building".

Congratulations to UNFPA and the MWGF Secretariat for bringing us together again today. Past editions of this forum have served as vibrant platforms to critically examine the barriers that women and girls face, fostering a shared understanding of Malaysia's legal and policy landscape. These discussions have delved deeply into the root causes of inequality, viewed through multiple lenses - economic, social, environmental, cultural, demographic, and human rights.

Such a comprehensive approach was indispensable for moving beyond reflection and analysis toward actionable, solution-oriented strategies. We have long acknowledged the barriers facing women and girls, and the evidence is clear.

The challenges have been studied, documented, and debated. The data, albeit insufficient, has told us at least part of the story. It is now time to shift the conversation from understanding the problems to driving actionable, transformative solutions. This is precisely what today's Forum seeks to achieve, making the choice of theme both timely and profoundly significant.

Esteemed guests, nation building, in its broader sense, is about fostering societal progress, resilience, and shared prosperity. Women's participation strengthens this foundation by bringing diverse perspectives to leadership, expanding the talent pool, and driving innovation across sectors.

When women have a voice in political decision-making, equitable policies flourish. When they are supported to thrive in the workforce, economies grow stronger and more inclusive. And when their leadership is normalised, societies move closer to their highest potential. Malaysia is no exception. From the nation's early days, women have been instrumental in shaping Malaysia's destiny. We must acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the pioneering women who paved the way. They have defied societal norms, challenged the status quo, and broken down barriers. What Malaysian women have achieved in nation building has inspired generations and their legacy serves as a powerful reminder of our moral obligation to raise the bar even higher.

*We often hear the argument that reforms must be grounded in Malaysia's unique socio-economic and cultural realities. While this is important, it should never be seen as an excuse to aim lower. **Rather, as Malaysia is bold and forward-looking in its pursuit of economic growth, sustainability, innovation and technological leadership, empowering women and girls must stand as a central and equally ambitious priority.***



Educated, healthy, resilient, equal, and fully empowered women and girls are not only essential enablers of progress but also a defining marker of a nation's development. The challenge, and the solution, lies in reimagining gender roles and creating the enabling environment for women to translate their education and skills into meaningful economic participation, political representation and leadership.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the call for bold steps to invest in women and girls resonates more strongly today as the world grapples with complex crises and existential threats. The SDGs have stalled. Progress toward SDG 5 in particular (achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls) has been disappointingly slow. Many targets are off track, and some indicators even show regression.

The review at the 30-year mark of the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action has highlighted the persistent and pervasive challenges women and girls face globally. Despite decades of advocacy and activism, the distance to equality is over a century long. Many women and girls continue to experience discrimination, violence, and limited opportunities. Progress in implementing the provisions of CEDAW has been uneven, despite the legally binding nature of this important convention - and Malaysia is party to it.

And while several milestones are worth celebrating, building a future where women and girls can fully participate and lead, a future of prosperity, equity, and sustainability, requires stronger political will, determination, and the active engagement of all sectors of society.

As Malaysia stands on the cusp of high-income status, the full and effective inclusion of women in the nation's economic, political, and social fabric is essential for building a prosperous and equitable future. Addressing the complex challenges of the "last mile" in achieving the SDGs in Malaysia requires the full partnership of women and men, standing shoulder to shoulder to shape a just and prosperous society.

Together, they must challenge inequality, confront injustice, and promote democracy and human rights. Fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands must be allies in this journey, championing a future where everyone's potential is realised. The voices of half the population must be heard, valued and celebrated.

Advancing women's political participation is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy, of a nation where every individual is empowered with equal rights to shape decisions that impact their lives and to contribute to the collective good. I am confident that today's discussions will inspire practical steps to tackle the challenges we know well and move closer to solutions proven to have accelerated progress towards true equality.

I close by reaffirming the UN's unwavering commitment to leveraging our knowledge, technical expertise, and convening power to support advocacy and co-create policy solutions that bring us closer to true equality and a future where everyone's potential contributes to nation-building.

Thank you.



Keynote Address #1

**YB Dato' Sri Nancy
binti Shukri**

● Minister of Women, Family and
Community Development

Building the Foundations Towards a Gender Equal Malaysia

Assalamualaikum and a very good morning to you all. I send my sincerest apologies for not being able to be with you all in person this morning, however it is my great pleasure to be able to virtually deliver my keynote speech today, titled 'Building the Foundations Towards a Gender Equal Malaysia.'

First, let me thank the United Nations Malaysia and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), as well as the Secretariat of the Malaysia Women and Girls Forum (MWGF) 2024 for organising another successful edition of this yearly event. This marks my third time addressing MWGF, a forum that consistently delivers insights and strategies for advancing gender equality in Malaysia.

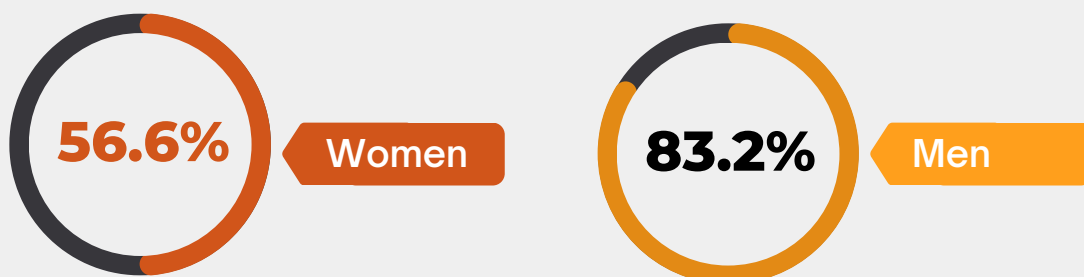
*Ladies and gentlemen, we as female leaders in government may be few - at least for now - but I believe our presence and our perspectives as women play a critical role in cultivating healthy and diverse systems of governance here in Malaysia. However, **as Malaysian women represent nearly half of our country's population, I believe that the full and equitable participation of women in politics and public life is a fundamental prerequisite to attaining gender equality in Malaysia, and thus ensuring long-term inclusive and sustainable development for our nation.***

The new challenges we face today require us to fully harness the talents and skills of our people - especially our women. We cannot afford to waste the depth of human potential we have as we navigate a rapidly changing world, with climate change already wreaking havoc on our shores, the rise of global conflict and instability, technological advances and shifts in population dynamics.

Esteemed Guests, equal participation is needed across all sectors - education, health, business, technology, governance, and more. Women must be empowered as equal contributors to nation-building alongside men, transforming our socio-economic, political, and cultural landscapes.

*Despite some progress, for example, ranking one of the highest in the world for female education attainment, significant gender gaps persist. Women's labor force participation stands at 56.6% compared to men's 83.2%. For every RM100 earned by men, women earn only RM66.67. As for representation in governance, female Ministers make up only 16.1% of our Cabinet; in other words, **I am one of just 5 women in our 31-strong cabinet. We do have a slightly higher proportion of female Deputy Ministers at 27.6%, however, only 13.5% or 30 out of 222 Members of Parliament in our Dewan Rakyat are women. And as for the civil service, as of now we have only two female Secretary Generals.***

Labour Force Participation



Esteemed guests, creating an environment to overcome significant gender disparities would require us to build a society that understands women have a nation-building responsibility, and I do not mean her responsibility in raising the next generation, which is a responsibility that should be equally shared with spouses, but rather, it is her contribution to the nation as a citizen and for her own personal growth and identity. That is why the Ministry is working hard to address barriers such as unpaid care work that disproportionately falls on women and harmful social norms perpetuating gender inequality, as well as addressing the prevalence and normalisation of violence against women in both online and offline spaces.

In May, we launched the Care Industry labs bringing together diverse Malaysian stakeholders to discuss the strengthening of our care industries in Malaysia. According to a report by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies,

if the Unpaid Care Work produced in Malaysian homes every day were valued in national GDP figures, this would create about RM379 billion in economic value – almost as big as our wealthiest state Selangor’s GDP in 2023 (RM 406.1 billion).

We recognise the fundamental importance Care plays in the functioning of our societies, and how access to quality and affordable Care – whether it be child care or elderly care – is key to sustainably managing our demographic challenges of tomorrow, including addressing the challenges of the sandwich generation. Our Anti Sexual Harassment Tribunal has also begun operations at the beginning of the year, to ensure safer working environments for both women and men – which will aid in increasing female labour force participation, productivity and overall wellbeing.

This year was also the year I headed a Malaysian delegation to the 88th session of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Geneva. This hearing was a valuable government-wide opportunity for us to take stock of our national efforts to combat gender discrimination, and receive feedback to refine our current strategies.

*Esteemed guests, following our successful CEDAW reporting earlier in the year, I am happy to announce that the discussions initiated with stakeholders across the year and the recommendations from the CEDAW Expert Committee were foundational to our updated National Women’s Policy and **newly drafted national Women Action Plan, or Pelan Tindakan Pembangunan Wanita set to launch early next year.***



This Plan aims to streamline all the policies and actions required to meaningfully empower women across all sectors - specifically through four main pillars: economic empowerment, leadership, safety, and wellbeing. This will involve the coordinated and collaborative participation of several Ministries and government agencies.

One of our aims is to empower women to become equal strategic partners in the country's socio-economic development. We will do this through supporting policies that encourage women to enter – and remain – in the labour force, through the strengthening of support facilities such as daycare centres, and ensuring workplaces are spaces of safety and respect. A Gender Responsive Budget will also be implemented in the annual budget review process. For leadership, our aim is to cultivate female talent and empower them to take on strategic leadership positions.

Our inaugural PERANTIS program for women leaders was recently successfully concluded with a Phase 2 going to begin next year. We will monitor the growth and facilitate the networks between female leaders, and strengthen the values of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the public and private sectors through training programs with MPs and other key stakeholders.

Esteemed Guests, Malaysia's socio-economic progress depends on inclusive development, requiring the full participation of women. True progress means removing all barriers limiting women's potential, ensuring their voices are heard and valued in building our nation.

As we inaugurate the 4th MWGF, I wish all attendees a day of meaningful dialogue and impactful solutions. Together, let us advance toward a gender-equal Malaysia.

Thank you.

Keynote Address #2

Challenges for Women in Political Leadership in Malaysia

SPEAKER



Assoc. Prof. Dr Sharifah Syahirah Syed Syekh
Vice Chancellor, Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia

MODERATOR



Emellia Shariff
Managing Partner,
Speak Up Malaysia

Takeaways

- 1 Political parties should implement structural reforms to ensure women occupy at least 30% of leadership positions. Strong female candidates should be prioritised by political parties, avoiding circumstances that undermine their success.
- 2 Women aspiring to leadership roles should focus on building expertise in public policy and governance.
- 3 Proper coaching and mentorship programs are essential to support aspiring female leaders in their political journeys.
- 4 Systematic monitoring and transparent reporting of data are necessary to assess and improve women's political representation.
- 5 Women need to assertively pursue political opportunities and push past structural barriers and societal stereotypes that undervalue their capabilities.
- 6 While empowering women has seen progress, it is equally important to educate men on adapting to and supporting gender equality. Achieving true gender parity in society requires active collaboration and shared efforts between women and men.



● Summary

Despite significant advancements in education, Malaysian women remain underrepresented in politics, a gap that hinders inclusive nation-building and the country's progress toward sustainable development.

In her keynote address, Dr Sharifah Syahirah outlined the barriers preventing greater political participation by women and proposed actionable strategies to bridge this gap. Drawing on data from the Human Development Index, she highlighted Malaysia's achievements in education and economic progress while noting the glaring disparities in women's representation within political and academic leadership. She emphasised that legislative representation is where meaningful change must occur. Women currently hold less than 15% of legislative seats, far below the 30% minimum target she envisions as a starting point.

The significance of women's participation in politics goes beyond representation. Women in political roles are more likely to address issues directly impacting women and children, such as combating sexual harassment - an agenda historically championed by female representatives. Furthermore, having more women in decision-making roles is a hallmark of a thriving democracy, which will enhance Malaysia's global standing in gender equality.

Dr Sharifah also pointed out that while Malaysia excels in areas like education and healthcare, the nation dropped 12 ranks on key indices, a decline she attributes to the low rate of women's political engagement.

Encouragingly, she noted some positive trends in gender equality. These include a growing number of men and boys sharing household responsibilities, more women in her university stepping into leadership positions, and male students volunteering for administrative roles.

She emphasised that women must be more assertive and network more. They must also cultivate deep knowledge of public policy.

Ultimately, Dr Sharifah believes that gender equality is a whole-of-society issue. She believes that structural changes within the party must be made to have a minimum of 30 percent of female candidates. Parties must also field strong female candidates and the candidates must network with the grassroots.

She highlighted a promising initiative by the National Council of Women's Organisations Malaysia (NCWO) - an organisation that she is in - that provides cross-partisan political training for women, calling this a step in the right direction to increase female representation in politics.



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF
WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS,
MALAYSIA



A non-political, non-religious body, was formed in 1963, and currently serves as a consultative and advisory body for 72 member organisations. It has no control over the internal affairs of affiliate organisations, but draws them together on issues in order to present a united front. Its aim is to raise the status of women and assist in the welfare of both women & children.

The keynote address transitioned into a discussion session moderated by Emellia Shariff, Managing Partner at Speak Up Malaysia. Emellia noted the numerous societal and structural barriers to women's political aspirations, observing that young girls are rarely encouraged to envision themselves as politicians.

She also critiqued the imbalance in leadership training efforts, which often focus heavily on preparing women for leadership roles while neglecting to sensitise men to gender equality. She argued that men must actively participate in fostering a more equitable society.



Keynote Address #3

Gender Equality and The Law



Latheefa Koya
Co-Founder & Advisor,
Lawyers for Liberty



Brenda Rangithan
Co-Chair, Gender Equality
& Diversity Committee, KL
Bar; Advocate & Solicitor,
Mohanadass Partnership

Takeaways

- 1 By not allowing retrospective applications of the recent citizenship law amendments, the government is penalising many Malaysian mothers and their children born abroad to non-Malaysian fathers.
- 2 Child marriage must be banned. The federal government should first ban it in the Federal Territories where it has jurisdiction by amending the relevant Islamic laws to raise the minimum marriageable age for females from 16 to 18 years old.
- 3 By banning child marriage in the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan, the federal government can set the tone as it works to convince other states to similarly ban child marriage.
- 4 Lawmakers and especially female lawmakers need to use their power and platform to push for gender equality instead of keeping quiet about injustices and perpetuating discriminatory laws.
- 5 Gender equality activists should continue speaking up and campaigning for their cause despite legal and political obstacles and setbacks.

Summary

The federal government's actions with regards to citizenship law amendments and child marriage show that it is not committed to pushing for gender equality in the law. Lawyers for Liberty co-founder and advisor Latheefa Koya argued in her keynote speech. Thus, activists and organisations need to continue working together and speaking up to push for progress.



Latheefa began by comparing the judicial system with the government, arguing that the latter had a far more active role in advancing gender equality. **Unlike the courts, the government is not limited to acting only when a case is brought before them.** They can intervene at any instance through policies and legislation. Regrettably, however, she said this power had more often than not been used to curb gender equality rather than advance it.

malaymail

Thursday, 17 Oct 2024 6:27 PM MYT

Equal citizenship for Malaysian mothers: A brighter future for some, but not all — Family Frontiers

In October 2024, the Dewan Rakyat voted to amend portions of the Federal Constitution to allow Malaysian women to confer their citizenship to children born abroad to non-Malaysian spouses. This right had previously only been granted to Malaysian men.

While lauded, the move was also criticised as it was not retroactive - meaning it would not apply to existing cases or any children who had been born before the amendment came into effect.

Latheefa said successive governments had initially resisted attempts to make citizenship laws more gender equal. When it finally conceded to public pressure, she said the amendments were “deliberately” made non-retroactive in a bid to “punish” mothers. **This move meant “not one person alive” could benefit from this amendment,** she rued. This change involved amending Section 1(b) and Section 1(c) of Part II of the Second Schedule of the Federal Constitution. Instead of only taking into account the father's citizenship, citizenship was now given to those “of whose parents one at least is at the time of the birth a citizen”.

During the vote, the government had controversially bundled together other changes to the constitution seriously affecting stateless children, children of permanent residents and foreign spouses of Malaysian men. Latheefa was especially critical of how the age limit for applying for Malaysian citizenship had been reduced from 21 to 18 years old. Calling the move “cruel”, she foresaw that “thousands” more Malaysia-born children would be rendered stateless in the coming years.

To illustrate how gender unequal laws have real-life consequences, Latheefa shared how she had handled a case involving four siblings born in Malaysia to a Malaysian father and Indonesian mother. Their parents' marriage was not registered in Malaysia and not recognised by the government.

Despite having lived in Malaysia their whole lives, the children were stateless and could not qualify for an identity card. Latheefa said the government had chosen to base its decision on Section 17 of Part II of the Second Schedule of the Federal Constitution - that says illegitimate children are to follow the citizenship of their mother. This, she elaborated, was despite judicial judgements in a previous case had ruled that this "unjust" Section 17 contradicted Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender.

The failure of successive administrations to ban child marriage was another big stain on the federal government, Latheefa said. Calling it a "national shame",

she regretted that **Malaysia had not been able to ban such marriages despite having ratified the United Nations Convention On The Rights Of The Child (CRC) in 1995. The convention classifies those aged 18 and below as children.**

theSun



According to statistics from the health ministry, between 2019 and 2023, over 26,617 children and adolescents aged 10 to 19 were recorded as being married and pregnant.

She also pointed to how Malaysia had passed the Sexual Offences Against Children Act in 2017, which criminalises the sexual grooming of a child.

Latheefa challenged the federal government's oft-used "excuses" for not raising the minimum age for marriage for Muslim females to 18 years old. Instead of framing it as a "sensitive" or "delicate" issue that is to be decided by the various states, she said the federal government had the power to "set the tone" for states to "take a cue" on the issue.

Islamic law is under the purview of respective states except in the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan, where it is under the federal government. Latheefa questioned why the federal government did not have the "political will or moral vision" to amend Section 8 of the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984 to raise the minimum age for marriage for Muslim females from 16 to 18 years old. At present, only two states have banned child marriage - Selangor and Kedah.

Asked during the question and answer segment about the federal government's controversial proposed Mufti Bill, Latheefa drew parallels between that and banning child marriage. Both are similar in how they involve amending Syariah laws affecting the Federal Territories. She pointed out that if the government could draft the Mufti Bill, then it could also – and in fact, should instead – focus its attention on amending laws to ban underaged unions.





Elaborating on the proposed Mufti Bill, she was concerned about how the government had brought forward the law to the Dewan Rakyat "in a secret fashion" without much prior discussion or public debate. Only when it was tabled could members of Parliament scrutinise its particulars, expected impact and whether it was even needed. Latheefa worried that there were not enough safeguards to prevent it from being used to limit the personal freedoms of women and girls. Especially as the proposed law seeks to give more legal power to fatwas.

In both child marriage and the citizenship law amendments, Latheefa regretted how lawmakers, especially female lawmakers, have failed to use their power to push for gender equality. **Having women in the government was no guarantee against gender inequality, she said. She especially chastised those who kept quiet and went along with the status quo for being "collaborators" in perpetuating discriminatory laws.** Latheefa criticised lawmakers who said they were "stuck" and had to "follow the party line" and vote for the citizenship law amendments. She disbelieved lawmakers who said they were unaware of the problematic portions of the amendments. Not only had the proposed changes been thoroughly discussed in Cabinet and government committee meetings, the issue had also been the subject of numerous letters, news articles and public discussions. Latheefa was further unconvinced by any "political assurance" that the amended citizenship laws would not be applied heavily handedly. Having rules, standard operating procedures or simply trusting the government to do the right thing was not enough, she stressed.

With these political and legal hurdles, Latheefa encouraged gender equality activists, organisations, lawyers and members of the public to continue working together to "extinguish" gender inequality from the law. She lauded women's rights groups and activists for being "very articulate" and persistent in their demands despite facing financial constraints and pressure from religious and legal authorities. She encouraged them to continue fighting and speaking up on issues, and cautioned against being intimidated by detractors who brand women as "too emotional". She also warned against being swayed to "go slow" when dealing with issues of gender discrimination.

Latheefa noted the need to expand discussions about gender inequality across language barriers and pre-existing prejudices. She further noted a need to take activism out of halls and "nice environments" to handling real-world cases.

Plenary Session #1

Female Representation in Public Life



YB Syerleena Abdul Rashid
Member of Parliament,
Bukit Bendera



Anne Lasimbang
Executive Director,
PACOS Trust



Prof Dr. Aishath Muneeza
Associate Dean, Students
& Internationalization,
INCEIF University



Pauline Ho
Corporate Sustainability &
Net Zero Leader, PwC (MY),
Steering Committee
Member, 30% Club Malaysia



Mediha Mahmood
CEO, Communications and
Multimedia Content Forum
of Malaysia (Content
Forum)

Takeaways

- 1 Public institutions and public spaces ought to be built and structured in consideration for the needs of women. Parliament and government buildings should be equipped with childcare facilities. Having more family-friendly and gender-safe spaces would encourage women to fully participate in public life.
- 2 Mentorship programmes for political leaders would allow experienced lawmakers to answer any questions young women may have about working in politics and encourage more women to run for office.

- 3 Mentorship programmes for corporate leaders would provide women with role models as well as information on how corporate boardrooms work, encouraging more women to vie for leadership positions.
- 4 Gender neutral policies at workplaces would encourage more women to vie for and stay in leadership roles. Women tend to compromise at work to perform care-giving responsibilities therefore gender neutral flexible working arrangements could encourage more men to take on care-giving roles.
- 5 Men in leadership positions should push for more women in leadership positions. Having more female leaders is better for both democracy and business.
- 6 Women must be trained and equipped to run for office so they can win and meaningfully represent the needs of women and the community. Or else female political representation will be reduced to tokenism.



Summary

In this discussion about female representation in public life, speakers stressed that mentorship, advocacy and gender responsive policies would further allow women to thrive in politics, work and leadership.

For Bukit Bendera member of parliament Syerleena Abdul Rashid, one key hindrance to equal representation was how public institutions and spaces are rarely built in consideration of a woman's needs, concerns, roles or experiences. Having more inclusive, family-friendly and gender-safe spaces would enable women to participate in public life while having their other needs met. For example, she proposed that Parliament and government buildings be equipped with childcare facilities. The lack of equal parental leave was another obstacle. ***The Employment Act 1955 stipulates that employers must grant 98 days of paid maternity leave but only 7 days of paid paternity leave. She said family and childcare ought to be regarded as a "shared responsibility" and called for gender roles and gender stereotypes that burdened women to be challenged.***

Drawing upon her experience as a lawmaker, **Syerleena saw a need for a safe space for women to obtain a political education. She envisioned a mentorship programme where women and girls with an interest in politics could gather, learn, ask questions and be nurtured by experienced politicians.** Another way to "level the playing field" was applying a gender quota to increase the number of women in legislative assemblies. Asked about ways to reduce technology-facilitated gender-based violence, the government backbencher pointed to recent amendments to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. The federal government said it wanted to protect internet users and children especially from harmful online behaviour but civil society groups strongly criticised how the authorities now have more power and even immunity to regulate online content, conduct seizures sans a warrant and compel social media platforms to disclose user data without judicial oversight. Syerleena acknowledged the need to strike a balance between keeping the internet safe for women and children, and defending freedom of speech. However, she noted how the internet provided users a certain degree of anonymity and impunity which has fueled paedophilia and hateful attacks online. She personally experienced this when some internet users falsely accused her of being "the daughter of a communist" following her father's death. **Syerleena also cited a 2019 case where a teenage girl had jumped to her death after asking on social media whether she should live or die. The 16-year-old from Sarawak had posted a poll on Instagram where 69% voted for "D" meaning die. Syerleena stressed that advocacy for both offline and online safe spaces needed to be done not just by women and girls, but men and boys also.**



Like Syerleena, **PwC partner Pauline Ho also believed in the value of mentoring women. A steering committee member of the 30% Club Malaysia, she oversees its Board Mentoring Scheme that connects aspiring women leaders to experienced board directors.** Over a course of nine months, the programme develops mentees' confidence, network and leadership capabilities.

As more of these "board ready women" are considered and appointed, the aim is to make boardrooms more **gender-diverse in line with the club's goal of having at least 30% female representation on the boards** of public listed firms. Pauline said the scheme began in 2017 in response to companies lamenting a lack of women candidates for board member positions. She had also observed that many capable women in the corporate sector were unaware of opportunities and underexposed to what it means to be a board member. She shared that the scheme just launched its tenth cohort, and has seen some 130 mentees in the past seven years with over 40% of them placed on boards.

Another observation Pauline made was that capable women in the corporate sector often "took themselves out of the equation" when faced with care-giving responsibilities. The burden of unpaid care work is especially directed at women. Thus, having gender neutral policies in workplaces would help shift the burden away from women, enabling more women to "put up their hands" for leadership roles. Gender neutral flexible working arrangements, for example, would enable more men to share care-giving responsibilities with their female partners. Pauline further advocated for "role modelling" - shining a light on men who have progressed in their careers while taking on care-giving responsibilities as their female partners also succeed in their careers.

In addition to mentoring and gender neutral policies, Pauline said women needed more male advocates. **Many decision-making roles are still filled by men, and these men need to be the ones "driving the agenda" for more women in corporate leadership.** She argued that having more female leaders was simply better for business, especially as half of consumers in many markets were women. **Having more women in the workforce would also contribute to the overall economic impact of a higher female labour force participation rate (LFPR).**



Similarly advocating for more female leaders was longtime activist Anne Lasimbang, who serves as the executive director of the Partners of Community Organizations in Sabah (PACOS) Trust. Based in Penampang, the trust supports indigenous communities across Sabah through projects involving matters like land rights, education, food security and entrepreneurship. **Anne shared that PACOS has been training women to become village chiefs, an initiative that she said had contributed to Sabah having a high number of female village chiefs.** She was against fielding women in elections as mere "tokens", and believed that developing female leaders at the grassroots level would prepare them well for higher office, hopefully moulding them into true champions for women and their communities. In the lead up to the 2025 Sabah election, she said PACOS Trust has been talking with political parties to convince them to field more female candidates. Her team has also been pushing for the nominated legislative assembly membership positions to be reserved for women. **The Sabah legislative assembly comprises 79 members - 73 of which are elected and six are nominated by the government. There is presently no gender quota for the nominated positions.** In both these initiatives, Anne noted that there was significant pushback for the male-dominated establishment but vowed to continue pressing for change.

Other obstacles holding women back from running for election were a lack of campaign funds and concerns about potential negative effects on a candidate's children and families.

With more female representation in Sabah politics, Anne hoped these women would work together to push for an end to child marriage. She shared that PACOS Trust has been running a campaign to educate indigenous communities and schools about the negative consequences of child marriage. The organisation has also been pressuring community leaders and lawmakers to amend the Native Court Enactment (Native Customary Law) 1995 to align with civil laws that set 18 as the minimum age for marriage. **There are presently no age restrictions on marriage in the Sabah native court system, and Anne shared that underaged unions persist as a "cultural practice" because poor families resort to it so that there are "less mouths to feed".** One strong proponent of banning child marriage in Sabah is Anne's sister - Kapayan lawmaker Jannie Lasimbang. Jannie reportedly began working on amending native laws in 2018 but Anne said the move was eventually "not supported" by other members of the legislative assembly. **In November 2024, it was reported that the Sabah cabinet was ready to discuss legal reforms and awareness campaigns related to banning child marriage in indigenous communities.**

Asked what jobs most suited indigenous women, Anne opined that they thrived when able to apply indigenous knowledge without being displaced from their native lands. Land was an integral part of indigenous identity, and she observed how some indigenous youth who had migrated to cities or Singapore to work "ended up on the streets". Anne believed that indigenous knowledge was relevant to addressing the effects of climate change, and hoped indigenous women would have more opportunities to contribute to society in a meaningful way.



Chiming in, Islamic finance expert Aishath Muneeza suggested that indigenous women could benefit from targeted financial literacy programmes. Entrepreneurship skills workshops would also teach these women how to generate an income without having to leave home. A professor at the International Centre for Education for Islamic Finance (INCEIF) University, she noted that the conditions and needs of a woman living in a village may differ from that of a woman living in a more urban area. **Due to insufficient collateral, women in rural areas are often excluded from "formal" financing from conventional banks and money lending agencies. Compared to these profit-driven commercial financial institutions,** Aishath said "social financing" facilities like micro-loans plus "fintech" (financial technology) applications helped facilitate the financial inclusion of these women. She pointed to Bank Negara Malaysia's iTekad, a programme that gives seed capital, micro-loans plus training to low-income micro-entrepreneurs. The government contributes to the seed capital while the central bank partners with conventional banks like Maybank and Bank Islam to administer micro-loans. Introduced in 2020 in response to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 6,500 people have since benefited from the ongoing programme.

As for fintech solutions, Aishath said Kenya's M-Pesa was a good example. Launched in 2007 to enable money transfers between 2G mobile phones, it is now a smartphone application that facilitates various kinds of financial transactions including government disbursements in countries beyond Kenya. Another example was bKash, a mobile financial services provider from Bangladesh aimed at rural communities who are traditionally excluded from formal financial facilities. Through applications like these, she said more women could access finance, perform transactions and become an entrepreneur via their mobile phones without having to travel long distances.

According to the World Bank, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of women in Malaysia in 2023 was 51.6% and 78% for men. Asked about ways to resolve this discrepancy, Aishath said the key was a bigger commitment to gender-responsive budgeting. **A gender-responsive budget considers the unique needs of different people groups, identifies gender-based disadvantages of specific policies and uses fiscal policies to address gender inequalities. In this regard, the biggest issue for her was the lack of equal parental leave.** The Employment Act 1955 stipulates that employers must grant 98 days of paid maternity leave but only 7 days of paid paternity leave. Echoing Syerleena, she said this big difference signalled that it was women who are primarily responsible for taking care of children. Instead of "putting all the pressure on women", Aishath cited how Iceland has policies that allow both men and women to share the responsibility of caring for and building their families. The Nordic country allows a combined total of 12 months of parental leave where each parent has an equal quota of 6 months – of which 6 weeks can be transferred to the other parent. Allowing men to participate more in childcare will allow more women to return to work after giving birth, thus increasing the LFPR of women. **Aishath recognised that the Malaysian government had introduced gender responsive policies like i-Suri – a voluntary savings programme aimed at housewives, widows, single mothers and single women.** Participating women are encouraged to contribute at least RM600 a year and the government provides matching contributions of up to RM300 annually. **However, she was concerned about the voluntary nature of the programme, and the exclusion of women – especially "unpaid domestic workers" like housewives – who could not afford to save. Aishath was worried that they and their struggles would be "invisible" to the system.**



Plenary Session #2

Making the Change: Navigating towards an Inclusive Future for Malaysia



SPEAKER

Kusaaliny Mahendran
National Executive Council
Member, DAPSY Malaysia



SPEAKER

Sean Augustin
Editor, Free Malaysia
Today



SPEAKER

Aroe Ajoeni
Co-Founder &
Communications Head,
KAMY- Klima Action
Malaysia



SPEAKER

Aveena Devi
Mixed Media Artist, Author
& Motivational Speaker



MODERATOR

Benedict Weerasena
Research Director, Bait Al
Amanah (House of Trust)

Takeaways

- 1 In politics, men are often selected based on their potential, while women are judged by their accomplishments. This double standard discourages women from pursuing political careers.
- 2 Female politicians frequently encounter microaggressions such as being questioned about balancing their careers with family responsibilities - questions rarely posed to their male counterparts.

- 3 Encouraging internships in political parties can inspire and motivate young women to consider careers in politics.
- 4 Indigenous women and girls often emerge as leaders, advocating for issues affecting their communities. The media plays a vital role in amplifying their voices, fostering human rights awareness.
- 5 Indigenous communities protect a lot of Malaysia's biodiversity, but addressing critical issues like land grabs and pollution must take precedence before assigning them broader climate responsibilities.
- 6 Respect, empathy, and inclusivity are essential for improving the treatment of people with disabilities, particularly in creating an inclusive education system.
- 7 Greater sensitivity toward people with disabilities must be promoted, such as respecting parking spaces that are reserved for people with disabilities.
- 8 Media portrayal and language matter significantly; for instance, using the term "undocumented migrants" instead of "illegal immigrants" can encourage a more objective view of migrants. Newsrooms should also refrain from acting as moral arbiters on issues. Instead, they should focus on objective and fair reporting, particularly on issues involving marginalised groups.
- 9 The media should adopt a gender-sensitive approach to reporting, avoiding victim-blaming narratives when covering cases of rape or other forms of gender-based violence.



● Summary

Successful nation-building in Malaysia requires including various segments of society, including women, those with special needs, rural populations, and indigenous communities. Additionally, the media plays a vital role in fostering a more inclusive environment.

DAP Socialist Youth member and MBPJ councillor Kusaaliny Mahendran shared that understanding the structure and the system of political parties is crucial to allow women to grow in them. DAP has a 30% quota for women to participate. In huge political parties such as DAP, which involves hundreds of thousands of people, such parties are divided into two camps: the leaders of the parties (those who win) and secondly, the grassroots who vote these people in. Leaders pull people up, while the grassroots push them up the ladder.

If you want to succeed, Kusaaliny said that you have to win the hearts and minds of the grassroots. She credits the internship programme by DAP for her success in joining and thriving in the party. The programme matches interns to a leader, allowing the interns to learn the ropes of navigating political life. She also credits her mentor Nalina Nair (MBPJ councillor) for her success, adding that she cannot underestimate the support from within her political party - the DAP - which has been instrumental in her journey as a young politician and policymaker.

That said, she cited instances where she was asked by members of the public when she plans to get married and how she plans to juggle her personal life with her responsibilities as a councillor. While she has learned to brush off such questions, she notes that her male councillor counterparts do not get asked such questions.



Kusaaliny said that women are often underestimated – while men are applauded and selected mostly on their potential and praised for being “highly energetic”, women on the other hand, must prove their accomplishments over and over again, thus dissuading women to pursue political careers. Men, Kusaaliny said, are given more chances at participating in politics and mostly on the first try, while a high unspoken barrier of entry into politics exists for women.

Furthermore, women are also scrutinised over their backgrounds and do not have a “trial phase” that men usually have. For example, Kusaaliny feels she has had to prove that she is capable of entering politics after she gained her master’s degree. However, Kusaaliny said that women also must believe in themselves – they do not have to know a hundred percent to enter politics, while men who know only 20 percent, for example, believe in themselves more. **To sum it up, Kusaaliny believes that for more Malaysian women to enter politics, there must be support from the political structure/parties as well as women’s belief in themselves.** After all, it is an ecosystem that must involve different sectors, such as NGOs and the media, for women to succeed in politics. The politician works with the media, and together they all work with NGOs, and everyone is held accountable.

Meanwhile, artist, author and motivational speaker Aveena Devi was asked about her experiences as a person with disabilities (PWD) and the advancements and gaps that PWDs face in Malaysia. She noted the legislative gaps affecting the disabled community in Malaysia. She spoke positively of meeting a woman called Dr Zaharah a few years ago. Dr Zaharah was active in the Ministry, and now is a doctor working in rehabilitation therapy. She taught Aveena that it is the responsibility of architects and other people to ensure that buildings are disability-friendly.

Aveena, who uses a wheelchair, said she was glad that newer establishments are becoming more disability-friendly - a stark comparison from when she was growing up - but pointed out that many hotels and shopping malls still continue to lack basic accessibility structures like parking facilities, or that these facilities are being taken up by abled-bodied people. As a consequence, she said that there are so many places in Malaysia that she cannot access, compared to abroad where it is more disability-friendly. She also said that despite being educated, people like her are still frowned upon, especially when applying for jobs.

She said people should exercise more sensitivity and empathy towards the PWD community – i.e. by being more mindful, considerate and inclusive. **Aveena emphasised that people without disabilities must not look at PWDs as “the other”, and must strike friendships with them. She also said that despite already reaching the age of 30, many people still are surprised by her eloquence and act patronisingly towards her.**

Aveena said that she has been fortunate to work with the arts and media to express herself. She has done various gigs and exhibitions of her paintings, and it is through this that she does her advocacy and in educating the public (people are often curious about her condition – something which she explains when she explains her art). She was involved with an art programme led by a theatre actor working in the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAAC). The programme was attended by people of various disabilities, such as those with hearing impairment as well as those with mental disabilities. The programme was designed according to each person’s disability, for example a tactile activity involved the use of their bodies.



Asked on what can be done by the government to make sure that Malaysia is more disability-friendly, Aveena said firstly, the public must be educated to be more sensitive and empathic towards PWDs. **PWDs must be given accessibility in instances such as when they go to college, for example. She said she is fortunate to have been homeschooled, but that she didn’t get to enjoy the privileges that her able-bodied siblings got to – i.e. her parents needed to write a letter to the Ministry for her to get accepted to school.** Aveena emphasised that the PWD community must take the initiative to make their needs known first rather than solely relying on policymakers. Asked whether she feels that her gender is a hindrance, Aveena said that the issue of disability takes precedence first, and not gender.

Climate activist Aroe Ajoeni highlighted that despite protecting 80 percent of the world's biodiversity, Indigenous People, especially Indigenous women, face specific barriers, especially land grabs and deforestation. A co-founder and communications head at environmental group Klima Action Malaysia (KAMY), she has worked with young women from the Jakun tribe in Pahang in a research project called 'Weaving hopes for the future' to document human rights abuses related to climate change. Aroe said that what she witnessed was urgent — extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change, destroy these communities' homes and alter their cultural practices.



*Because of climate change and extreme weather events, whole villages have been wiped out, and that includes the artefacts of Indigenous People as well. **For example, the recent floods impacted 150,000 people, mostly in Indigenous communities in Kelantan and Pahang. Deforestation on their lands has long been going on, and this is exacerbated by climate change, such as when heavy rains occur. This is rarely highlighted by the media.***

Aroe also emphasised that climate change is not gender-neutral as climate change disproportionately affects women, who often take on additional responsibilities during emergencies, such as staying back with ill/elderly/disabled family members when extreme weather events occur. Women are also the first ones to stand up for their communities, highlighting the emergency supplies needed during these crucial times. This also spills over to care work, where women are disproportionately burdened by extra care work during extreme weather events. Aroe said that this is why Malaysia needs a plan for the care economy. "We don't have an option anymore," Aroe said.



*In light of this, she calls for better data collection to document Indigenous women's realities. This would ensure their voices and concerns are included in climate discussions. Her organisation KAMY already does this, but much more needs to be done – for example, the government must collect gender-disaggregated data especially when it comes to climate impacts and disaster-risk management. **Gender-disaggregated data will then allow for budget-tagging and ultimately climate budget-tagging so that the appropriate amount of our national budget can be channeled to help Indigenous communities, especially women, affected by climate change.***

This will allow Malaysia to see whether there is action and impact on the ground, rather than just have conversations on the international level about high-level climate policies. Aroe said she has been to international conferences where topics such as carbon credit is discussed, and then she goes to the villages and sees how people are immediately impacted by climate change. **She said that when it comes to a just transition, Malaysia should not just stop at discussing ideas such as clean technology (e.g. hydro energy) but also ask itself who are the ones most impacted by such projects.**

Regarding leadership, Aroe also said that we should not pressure the Indigenous communities to step up further on climate action (for example, representing themselves in Parliament) than they already do, when their basic human rights – for example the right to not have their land taken away by governments and corporations, and protection for their rainforests from being razed – are still being trampled on. That said, Indigenous women, in particular young Indigenous women, are stepping up and telling their own narratives when it comes to environmental issues. Being allies to them is also important. Ultimately, **Aroe said that climate change is a whole-of-society issue and different groups/stakeholders must work together collaboratively, not in silos, and discussions and actions must be taken on the local, regional and international levels.**

Lastly, **Free Malaysia Today news editor Sean Augustin discussed the important role of the media in advancing inclusive nation-building.** He himself has written many articles about Malaysian women's participation in politics and public life, including highlighting feminist activists' call for the public to stop policing what women wear, referring to the criticisms levelled against the uniforms of Malaysian stewardesses.

However, Sean noted that even now in 2024, pervasive stereotyping and sexism exist in Malaysian media. **Sean pointed out that a conservative culture of sexism persists in media narratives, especially among older news editors in the newsroom, who do not only act as information gatekeepers, but also feel the need to act as moralists.**



He criticised the **media's use of gender stereotypes especially in reporting elections, where sensationalist articles on a female political candidate's appearance or family ties tend to appear more than pieces on her policies, citing what happened in the run-up to the last General Elections (GE).** He said such 'reporting' is carried out by tabloid-like online portals and must be avoided, and instead journalists must instead ask female politicians about their policies and plans. Sean believes that many female MPs have good ideas, however they do not get the limelight that they deserve because they are overshadowed by others, i.e male politicians who give outlandish statements to the media. Sean brought up a study that was cited by the organisers that said that **the greater the level of sexism, the less incentive for women to participate in politics.**

Sean believes that **the media can push for greater gender women's participation in politics by amplifying the voices of female candidates – for example, during the run up to the General Elections, political parties can select female candidates whose voices they want to see highlighted in the media.** Usually, the problem is a lack of time on the part of the political parties and therefore securing interviews with female candidates is difficult.

Sean also said that whenever a tragedy occurs, such as landslides or floods, the public wants to know things such as the death toll, injuries sustained, etc. This leads to a flurry of actions such as a call for a taskforce to be set up, as well as committees. However, Sean noted that there lacks gender-specific data – i.e. how tragedies like landslides or floods affect women. He said that this is where organisations such as KAMY which Aroe is in, can work together with the media to push out gender-specific data and news.

Sean also believes that **editors and journalists must always be sensitive in the way they word and phrase their reporting, for example using the term "undocumented migrants" instead of "illegal immigrants" may lead to less xenophobia and racism.** He said that the media has an important role to play in responsibly framing stories and choosing words carefully - especially when it comes to portraying women fairly, rejecting victim blaming narratives and minimising harm to survivors of rape and other forms of gender based violence.



Plenary Session #3

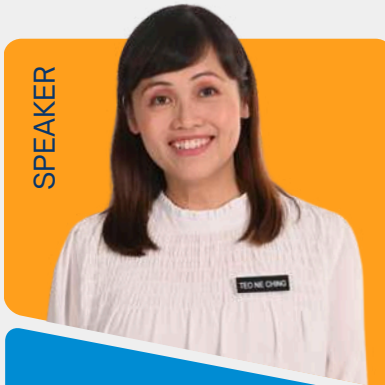
In Conversation with Malaysia's Female Nation Builders

SPEAKER



**YB Senator Datuk Seri
Dr. Hajjah Zurainah Musa**
Senator, Upper House of
Representatives Malaysia

SPEAKER



YB Teo Nie Ching
Deputy Minister of
Communications

MODERATOR



Tehmina Kaoosji
Independent Broadcast
Journalist, Partner &
Comms. Director, The Big
Picture (TBP)

Takeaways

- 1 Societal expectations upon women to bear the burden of caregiving and household responsibilities remain a significant barrier to achieving gender equality in both the workforce and political leadership.
- 2 A cultural shift is needed to recognise caregiving as a shared responsibility between men and women, supported by policies and infrastructure that promote equitable participation in care work.
- 3 Equal parental leave, childcare support, and elderly care assistance are necessary policies to enable women to return to and remain in the workforce, thereby increasing female labor force participation.
- 4 With 70% of informal workers being women, particularly from rural and indigenous communities, government policies must focus on providing these workers pathways to economic stability.
- 5 Women must strive for financial security, whether through employment or entrepreneurship, as a safeguard against economic challenges and as a step toward greater personal agency.

- 6 Female politicians face unique challenges, including societal scrutiny over their appearance and family roles. Addressing these double standards is essential to foster a more inclusive political environment.
- 7 Proportional representation in party staffing and participation at conferences are important steps to ensure more women have a seat at decision-making tables.
- 8 Women disproportionately face financial insecurity in old age due to wage gaps and career interruptions. Policies that address these systemic inequities are vital for economic justice.

Summary

Deputy Minister for Communications Teo Nie Ching shared her personal experience with sexism - how she is frequently asked about how she balances her political career with family responsibilities when the same question is seldom directed at her male counterparts. She also notes that the media tends to focus on female politicians' looks and dressing style, rarely on their plans and policies.

*In order to counter such sexism, Teo believes in the power in numbers and the need for gender mainstreaming. **She stressed the importance of increasing female labor force participation, currently around 56%, to at least 65% as an initial target.** To achieve this, she advocates for policies that support working mothers, including initiatives that help women re-enter the workforce after childbirth as well as policies that improve assistance for elderly care.*



The Deputy Minister also spoke of the importance of support from spouses in ensuring women are equally able to pursue their careers, dreams and ambitions. This would require give and take between spouses, involving shared responsibility and taking into account aspects of flexibility, timing and opportunity for both spouses, as she believed women should not by default be expected to sacrifice their personal ambitions to cater solely to familial duties.

Teo emphasised that the care economy must be reframed to shift societal attitudes and perceptions that caregiving, housework, and elderly care are primarily a woman's responsibility. **She also criticised double standards that label assertive women – but not assertive men – as negatively “bossy” or “aggressive”.**

In her party, she observed that while there are men who are not supportive of women's presence, there are men who are supportive, and that is why she believes in the importance of male allies. In line with this, Teo believes that it is the responsibility of political parties – not just the women – to recruit more women members.

Teo also said her party, the DAP, is committed to gender balance through initiatives like proportional representation of women in appointing staff and when sending delegates to conferences. She said this is important as it gives political exposure to the women within her party.



Senator Dr Hajjah Zurainah Musa underscored that gender equality is a cornerstone of democracy. Echoing Teo's call, she advocated for shared responsibility in caregiving, urging parents to teach their sons to take on household and caregiving tasks. This would call for a cultural shift in how our society views men's roles and women's roles and responsibilities — not segregated, but shared equally.

Such attitudes can and must be facilitated by implementing progressive laws and policies, for example, equal parental leave, childcare support, and elderly care assistance. Speaking of policy, she believes that there must be a 50% quota reserved for women in political parties.

However, she also emphasised that women themselves must step out of their comfort zones, pursue their ambitions boldly and negotiate for more equitable partnerships at home – i.e. women must be the change they want to see.

She added that husbands must also be supportive in equal responsibilities at home and also in giving their wives the freedom and space to carve a life of their own. She cited her own experience of being a politician while being a mother to several children and of recently getting a PhD. It was important for women to voice their concerns and actively push for policy improvements, she urged.

Financial independence is another critical issue, as women must establish safety nets, and therefore women must earn their own income. She said that women are financially capable, as evidenced by studies that show that women are better paymasters than men. **She cited her experience talking to B40 women and observed that the spending power exists in the hands of these women who are responsible for putting food on the table for their families. Therefore, a gender equitable policy must also take into account financially-disadvantaged women.** Ultimately, Senator Dr Hajjah Zurainah Musa said she doesn't call for gender supremacy or special treatment for women, but simply gender equality.



Meanwhile, moderator Tehmina Kaoosji highlighted the positive trend of the growing progressive voice among young women worldwide — however, she said that young men ages 25 and below are becoming more conservative. Tehmina pointed out the implications of these trends on women's political participation, namely technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

She also highlighted the dominance of women in the informal workplace, accounting for 70% of this sector. Many of these women are rural dwellers, Indigenous women and elderly individuals. She argued that government policies must protect these women from falling deeper into poverty and address the unique challenges they face. Tehmina discussed this "feminisation of poverty," where more women tend to lack financial resources as they age due to the gender wage gap and having to perform caregiving duties in their lifetime.

