

WOMEN UP! REPORT 2022

INCREASING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIA SUMMARY



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WONDERERS**
THE GLOBAL CHANGE MAKERS

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POLITICAL CONSULTING

Photo: Nurul Fadzilah Kamaluddin, Perikatan Nasional candidate for P118 – Setiawangsa.
15th General Election, November 2022

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Women Up!

Increasing Women's Political Participation in Malaysia

Report 2022 – Summary

A Report by SoCo and World Wonderers

with the generous support of The Council of Malaysian Women Political Leaders
(COMWEL)



SoCo - Political Consulting <https://www.so-co.my>

SoCo is an exclusive political consulting firm based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. We proudly advise individuals, and public and private entities globally in all matters related to political strategy: governance, foreign policy, risk analysis, electoral campaigns, government-to-government and government/public relations. We are a human-sized firm that provides exclusive tailor-made solutions based on the client's specific needs. Our outstanding success record is built on the combination of the necessary expertise, discretion resulting in effective and innovative approaches to address our clients' challenges. Our unique networking, outreach, and in-depth knowledge of local and international politics give us distinctive insights and fresh perspectives.



World Wonderers <https://www.worldwonderers.org/>

World Wonderers is a social business based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It began in response to the political (dis-)empowerment of marginalized populations in Malaysia. WoW is committed to supporting both Malaysian and global communities in the reclamation of their history and political agency. WoW develops innovative high-social impact digital solutions to empower minorities to create more sustainable and equitable societies. We build the capacity of these communities to mobilize against intolerance and exclusion, we amplify their voices. Together we foster stronger movements for equality. We also offer consulting services to like-minded organisations globally, in the area of digital cultural preservation, community empowerment and social projects design.

1. Introduction

As we celebrate International Women's Day 2023 themed "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality"; we aim to share some of the considerations we have been reflecting on. Our women-led teams at both World Wonderers and SoCo Political Consulting, participate in the global discussions regarding minorities and specifically women and girls' political participation. As we support our clients and like-minded organisations to reach their social, political, or cultural goals, we proudly contribute to building global knowledge, developing research-based policies, designing, and implementing socio-political development and cultural preservation projects. The "Women Up! Report 2022" demonstrates the gap persisting between men and women political participation in Malaysia; we hope this will serve as a basis for further research and the formulation of targeted policies. Our Report also gives preliminary recommendations for the creation of digital tools to contribute to increasing women and girls' political literacy, training for women candidates and women members of State and Federal Parliaments. On this day, for all women and girls globally, we shall relentlessly voice this fact: a society that ignores half of the population is a society that cannot flourish.

In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, where a worldwide platform of action for women's equality and empowerment was created. The establishment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) still remains central to promoting the fundamentals of human rights and equality for women around the world. The signatories' decision to work towards increasing female representation in decision-making positions to 30% was a major step towards gender equality and human progress.

Malaysia signed CEDAW in 1995, but the government only ratified its objective of strengthening national development goals in 2004. Although Malaysia is also a signatory of CEDAW and several other international and regional treaties, the Southeast Asian country has continuously failed to successfully adopt most recommendations. Women still occupy less than 15% of seats in Parliament, landing the country number 143rd on a list compiled by the United Nations (UN) Women in Politics 2020 mapping exercise, and far below the world average (24.9%), the Asian average (20.5%) and the Middle Eastern and African (MENA) average (17.5%).

The **illusion of equality**, or the erroneous belief that equality has already been achieved, has become an entrenched impediment in the way of Malaysian women's progress. For Malaysian women, success is perceived to be a matter of individual performance; leaving the structural factors hindering women's participation in politics (and in leadership positions in general) ignored and overlooked.

The 14th and 15th Malaysian General Elections held respectively in 2018 and in 2022, brought to power a generation of reformists from the coalition Pakatan Harapan. However, the progress towards gender equality and women representation have remained modest. In 2018, the number of women elected in the Parliament was 32 that is 14,41%. Mohamad Mahathir's government included only 5 women out of 28 Ministers. During the General Election in November 2022, 30 out of the 222 Members of Parliament are women; 23 of which are Bumiputera, 7 Chinese while Indian women do not have any representation. The 10th Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar

Ibrahim's cabinet includes 5 women and 22 men (approximately 18% women), however this remains relatively far from the objective set by International Conventions and all international agencies recommendations; and even further away from the very concept of gender parity.

As this report will show, women's representation is limited due to legal, social, economic, and political constraints. Like that of many other countries, the Malaysian political system is androcentric and based on a patriarchal social model. Women's decision-making power is directly impacted by these structures at every level of society, and resistance is also faced by those women who are elected to public office. From political participation at the grassroots level to decision-making in positions of power, women are pressured *not* to seek leadership positions. If they do so, they are confined within the limits of existing structures and are not given the liberty to govern in a way that reflects their perceptions and needs.

2. Main findings and recommendations for Malaysia

2.1. *A multilevel challenge*

Women face political, social and cultural obstacles which prevent them from accessing positions of political leadership. As such, decision-making in Malaysia is an almost exclusively male affair. In 2022, the PH-BN led government counted only 5 women Ministers out of over 27 Ministers positions and only 8 women Deputy Ministers, that is a total of only 13 women in a 54 Ministers and Deputy Ministers Cabinet. In 2021, there were only eight women ministers and deputy ministers, out of over 60 Cabinet positions in the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, thus demonstrating the leadership's apathy towards improving the women's agenda. From May 2018 to January 2020, the 22 months under Pakatan Harapan (PH) leadership did not allow for fundamental change, but some valuable initiatives were taken to increase women's participation and improve access to key leadership positions. However, several controversies, notably the ban on child marriage, were also faced by the same PH government. The hesitation of the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs to take a clear position indicates the resistance of the existing political culture – i.e., one that diminishes women's positions in society. Such patterns of masculine domination are entrenched in the culture and socialisation of both men and women. Without proper awareness and genuine political will, those patterns – as perpetuated by both sexes – will continue to be perpetuated as gender norms.

Some measures, both short- and long-term in nature, must be taken to bridge the gap in political representation between women and men, and to break this pernicious system of gender discrimination. We believe in operationalising a non-antagonistic, bottom-up approach to circumvent the main obstacles to women's political participation, one which focuses on education and policy. The creation of new legal and political tools is both necessary and urgent to engineer more robust education systems, policy development and, ultimately, social change. We recommend the: (1) implementation of short-term quotas; (2) regulation of party financing (to alleviate the financial burdens on women candidates); (3) immediate institution of compliance mechanisms for all political institutions, which both respect current legal provisions and prevent gender discrimination; and, finally (4) the creation of women's caucuses in Parliament and individual State

Assemblies – these are the best mechanisms for promoting the women’s agenda in a collaborative manner, which will transcend party lines.

Recommendations

- **Introducing short-term quotas;**
- **Regulating party financing;**
- **Instituting compliance mechanisms; and**
- **Creating women’s caucuses**

In the short term, and with immediate effect, we recommend the development of civic education programmes for women and girls to empower them to break through cultural stigmas against women’s leadership. Their understanding of laws and rights can translate into transformative action; vice versa, a lack of knowledge may lead to the perpetuation of discriminatory practices or the internalisation of discrimination as gender norms. Besides that, the training of female candidates and elected representatives would also contribute towards strengthening their confidence and self-image, which would thus give them an edge over their male counterparts. Both steps are essential and relatively easy to implement as civil society initiatives – with the possible partnership of political actors such as state institutions and/or political parties. Finally, the training of women electoral observers and their presence at polling stations would encourage women voters to exercise their rights and allow for not just greater control over the voting process, but also improved access to voting for women and minorities.

Recommendations

- **Education on civic and women’s rights;**
- **Training of female candidates and elected representatives; and**
- **Training of female political observers.**

2.2. *Laws for social engineering*

The efforts by successive Malaysian governments have been slow at bridging the gap between men and women in terms of political representation, scoring below the world average of 24.9% women’s participation.¹ Looking at case studies globally allows us to evaluate which tools may be best suited for the Malaysian context. The countries explored in Section 4 are very different in terms of their demographics, cultures and histories. While few elements unite Tunisia, Uruguay

¹ See Section 1.

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and Rwanda at first sight, some similarities can be drawn from these different national experiences. Among them, we identified several key elements that could serve as relevant frameworks.

a. Quotas: The mechanism of choice

Quotas are designed to echo demographic realities in terms of institutional representation. It is only fair that every group in society is involved in representative institutions such as Parliaments or local councils. **To increase the presence of women in public institutions, quotas are the mechanism of choice**, thus overcoming individual political parties' resistance by dictating a rule to be applied equally to everyone.

Quotas become even more effective when they are legally binding and sanctioned, by which **the law rejects electoral lists that do not respect rules such as gender alternation or minimum percentages**, like those employed in Tunisia and Rwanda.

However, quotas can undermine women's representation if they are too low. Not only do low quotas fail to reflect actual demographics (in most countries, women represent little over half the population), but they also distort reality. In this context, quotas draw a mental limit, one which is detrimental to women's capacity for participation. Even when a gender “balance” is ostensibly met, it can give the false impression of gender equality while discouraging women. For example, Uruguay has seen a stagnating average percentage of women in Parliament: around 13% from 1997 to 2020.² This deficiency is mainly attributed to ineffective gender parity electoral legislation.

Therefore, if quotas are a necessary first step towards achieving numerical equality, they can in fact produce the opposite effect by propping up a status quo which is unfavourable to women's participation. For that reason, **Malaysia must impose a minimum 30% quota**, as recommended by CEDAW, in all decision-making entities and mechanisms of compliance.

b. Caucuses: Highly effective at fostering women's agendas

Historically, social advantages are rarely gained without organised social mobilisation. In this regard, Rwanda offers a striking example of what can be achieved when women overcome political divergences to promote collective advancement. We reviewed how the women's caucus in Rwanda broke the glass ceiling imposed upon them by restrictive quotas, thus leading to Rwanda having the highest proportion of women in politics worldwide.

Where such caucuses are put into place, key social reforms are passed. In the US, the caucus established in 1977 is responsible for the ratification of all major social advancements for women. These include the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978), the Women's Business Ownership Act (1988) and the Violence Against Women Act (1994), to name a few. Despite women constituting

² World Bank. 2020. “The World Bank Data Gender Parity Index, Uruguay.”

only 24% of members in Congress, their caucus gives them an influence that goes beyond actual numerical representation.³

Undeniably, one key element of caucuses' long-lasting success is multi-partisanship. By gathering Parliamentarians from across the whole political landscape, **caucuses share a goal of pushing the women's agenda within their individual parties.** Without winning their male counterparts' support, women cannot pass major social and legal reforms.

Moreover, to further consolidate their influence, **women's caucuses should create alliances** with stakeholders within the government and administrative bodies. They should also collaborate with civil society and the media to initiate public debate on the issues at stake. Thus, women's issues are discussed more broadly, beyond being solely partisan matters, thus making them matters of general public interest.

Recommendations

- **Creation of caucuses at federal and state levels to push for reforms on party financing, quotas and compliance mechanisms;**
- **Implementation of short-term, minimum 30% quotas;**
- **Promote the implementation of voluntary quotas for political parties; and**
- **Promote parity between men and women in electoral mandates and elective functions.**

2.3. Women Political Awareness: Breaking through cultural obstacles

During our research, and in every survey that we reviewed, women cited *culture* – with its deeply hostile aspects such as toxic masculinity and traditional gender roles – as the main obstacle towards their involvement in public life. If the law cannot change the way society views women over the course of a few years, it can surely draw limits to dehumanising behaviours. Serious engagement by the authorities is necessary to tackle gender-based violence and patriarchal traditions which limit women's autonomy – especially in rural and disadvantaged areas, where these inhibitions are even more pervasive.

Women's political awareness, or knowledge of their rights and democratic ideals, is a necessary condition to enable progress towards creating sustainable and equal societies. Awareness enables critical consciousness and imagining alternatives; alternatives to the constraints of conservative societies, inequalities, imbalanced power dynamics, violence and silence. In contexts where they are subjugated to antiquated legal, social or political systems, women are deprived of aspirations. Raising political awareness is like planting the seeds for change. As Simms writes: "If

³ Women's congressional policy institute. n.d. "Caucus History & Accomplishments." <https://www.wcpinst.org/>.

you want change to happen, you have to change deeply embedded cultural narratives.”⁴ Women need ideals, which then translate into practice, thus allowing them to think without fear and to move their communities forward.

Women’s equality is deeply impacted by cultural and historical contexts. We explored the many obstacles which women faced in getting more involved in politics – indeed, most of them cannot be overcome by legal reforms alone but require a broader paradigm shift. In Rwanda, the genocide led to an overturning of social norms, thus enabling women to enter politics. In Tunisia, the 2011 Revolution helped women to reclaim their voices and play a bigger role in shaping the new democracy.

Creating the conditions for genuine participation begins with education: knowing their rights and the mechanisms of the broader system are the best catalysts by which women and girls halt political inhibitory factors, enable greater political participation and, if they wish, facilitate their ascension to political leadership. In absence of genuine initiatives by the government, we believe that civil society should lead initiatives to develop interactive and digital tools for the empowerment of women and girls; and also for elected women.

Additionally, to develop greater awareness of political empowerment and increase the visibility of role models, media programmes such as podcasts or short videos for social media should be developed, to be targeted at women and girls. Such programmes would feature short interviews with women (e.g., politicians, athletes, business women, activists) and discuss their paths towards success.

Finally, the organisation of specific training for the democratic inclusion of women political observers, who will be posted inside and outside polling centres, could counter deterring factors – such as bullying, intimidation and long waiting times with children, to name a few – which women face when going to the polls.

Recommendations

- **Developing interactive tools for empowerment;**
- **Developing digital and interactive applications for the civic education;**
- **Developing online training modules for women candidates and community leaders;**
- **Developing handbooks for elected women;**

⁴ Simms, Andrew. 2017, November 1. “We need new fairy stories and folk tales to guide us out of today’s dark woods.” *The Guardian*.

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As long as Malaysia does not realise gender parity, it will stagnate in the purgatory of political transition. Democratic transitions are conditioned not just by the implementation of existing policies and laws, but also the development of new legal, social and political approaches to democratic institutions. Including women in the decision-making process and allowing equal access to governance will prove to be an undeniable asset. Social development and women's participation are deeply interconnected. Governance without the optimal involvement of women runs the risk of missing its objectives; a society that ignores half of the population cannot flourish.