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Intern paper: Women in Malaysian Politics

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Executive Summary

- In this paper, we explore the positions of women in education and in the workforce, and examine how that in turn has influenced their representation in politics. We first observe the following:
 - Female students outperform male students in primary and secondary schools, and outnumber them in Malaysian public tertiary institutions;
 - There is a high percentage of women who hold entry-level positions; however, most of them leave to raise families and do not return to the workforce, largely due to the lack of welfare benefits for new mothers in Malaysia; and
 - As most women leave the workforce in their mid-20s, hardly any have the experience to climb the corporate ladder, let alone seek out leadership positions in the public sector.
- Based on interviews with four women Members of Parliament (MPs) and one State Assemblywoman (namely YB Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, YB Nurul Izzah Anwar, YB Dr. Siti Mariah Mahmud, YB Fuziah Salleh, and YB Hannah Yeoh), we identify three core issues hindering female participation in politics:
 - The existence of a cultural glass ceiling in Malaysia for women in politics;
 - Work-life balance being more of an issue for women than for men; and
 - Women politicians experiencing more boundaries to being elected compared to their male counterparts.
- The Malaysian government has previously committed to several initiatives such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, the UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, and a 2003–2006 collaboration

with the UN Development Programme, "Towards Achieving at Least 30 Percent Participation of Women at Decision Making Levels in Malaysia." However, the percentage of women MPs in the Dewan Rakyat remains low at 10.4% in 2017.

- While the Nordic countries' collective effort on the Nordic Cooperation Programme on Gender Equality is likely unfeasible among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Malaysia can still learn from some of the Nordic countries' individual efforts, including:
 - Revising our electoral system from a plurality, first-past-the-post voting system to a proportional representation system; and
 - Like Prime Ministers Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir of Iceland and Olof Palme of Sweden, our political leaders should publicly advocate the issue of gender equality in politics.
- Referencing examples in North America and Europe, we make recommendations towards promoting female retention in the workplace and representation in politics, such as:
 - Implementing affirmative action policies in company committees, boards, and councils to give women a voice in decision-making roles;
 - Updating maternity leave benefits to paid maternity leave for a more optimal amount of 50 weeks, as opposed to the current 60 days available;
 - Installing family-friendly facilities, including lactation rooms and childcare centres to accommodate new mothers returning to the workplace; and
 - Temporarily enforcing a gender quota in Parliament and the State Assemblies until 30% female representation is achieved, and revising this quota once the 30% is met.
- The shortage of women in politics is a universal issue. Liberal democratic countries have long been pushing for gender equality not only in politics,

but on all fronts. It is time that Malaysia fulfilled her goal of becoming a developed nation by joining in the fight for this fundamental human right.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The patriarchal nature of politics is by no means exclusive to Malaysia; it is prevalent in most of the world. Only two countries in the world have more women than men in their lower house of Parliament: Rwanda and Bolivia.¹
- 1.2 This paper aims to explore women's participation in politics by considering how gender inequality in Malaysia hinders women from assuming leadership roles, particularly in the Malaysian Parliament and State Assemblies.
- 1.3 We will refer to four Nordic countries, where gender inequality is lowest in the world, and analyse the measures they took to increase female participation in politics.
- 1.4 We will also take a comparative look to determine the possibility of implementing specific policies from other countries in Malaysia. The economic and social benefits of these politics will be evaluated.
- 1.5 This paper is based on desktop Internet research as well as first-person interviews with five Malaysian women politicians: YB Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, YB Nurul Izzah Anwar, YB Siti Mariah Mahmud, YB Fuziah Salleh, and YB Hannah Yeoh. They give insight into performing the conventional roles of wife and mother while striving to succeed in one of the most culturally-unconventional professions for a woman, namely that of a politician.

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in national parliaments*, 2017, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

2.0 Where do Malaysian women stand?

- 2.1 In order to fully comprehend the lack of women in Malaysian politics, this section will discuss women's participation in education and in private-sector employment. We argue that these factors have, in turn, influenced women's involvement in Parliament and the State Assemblies.
- 2.2 A gender disparity exists in Malaysian public universities, with the percentage of female students superseding that of male students:
- (a) 62% of the student population at Malaysia's flagship university, Universiti Malaya (UM), are female;² whereas
 - (b) Eight other universities—including Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)—have female student populations that more than double that of their male counterparts.³
- 2.3 Additionally, a 2010 study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that girls outperformed boys in all four national examination subjects—Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mathematics, and Science—at both primary and lower-secondary levels.⁴
- 2.4 It is thus disconcerting that Malaysia has the lowest female labour force participation rate among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries, at 49% in 2016. **Figure 1** (next page) shows Malaysia's position relative to the other ASEAN countries, with a decade's comparison between 2006 and 2016.⁵

² Kian Ming Ong, 'Malaysian Boys "Missing" from Public Universities', *Penang Institute*, 30 May 2016, <http://penanginstitute.org/v3/media-centre/press-releases/841-malaysian-boys-missing-from-public-universities>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ N. Goolamally and J. Ahmad, 'Boys Do Poorly in Schools: The Malaysian Story', Unpublished Manuscript, 2010, cited in United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), *Why are Boys Under-performing in Education? Gender Analysis of Four Asia-Pacific Countries*, 2012, https://www.unicef.org/eapro/report_why_are_boys_underperforming_FINAL.pdf, p. 14.

⁵ The World Bank, *Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)*, 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>.

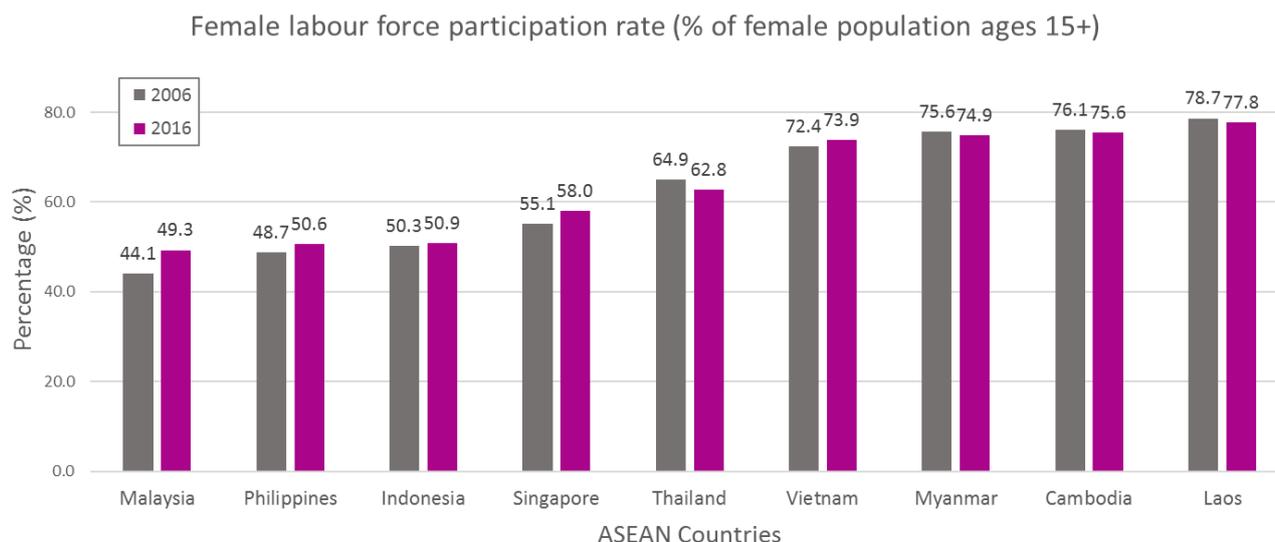


Figure 1: Female labour force participation rates among ASEAN countries, with a comparison between 2006 and 2016. Numbers sourced from the World Bank's online database.

- 2.5 In Malaysia, women make up 50% of entry-level professionals. However, a mere 5–6% work their way up to become Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and board members.⁶
- 2.6 Although Malaysian women actively seek employment upon graduation, they tend to leave the labour force around the age of 30 years to start families. This brief stint does not give them enough time to climb the corporate ladder, and few consider returning to work later on.⁷ In a survey by Talent Corp. Malaysia Bhd. and ACCA Malaysia Sdn. among 824 respondents, about two-thirds cited raising a family as the main reason why women quit their jobs.⁸
- 2.7 In the wider context, the marginalisation of women in the workforce despite their success in education is a clear indication of why they are inhibited from joining politics. With most Malaysian women leaving the workforce to raise families, and only 5–6% rising to senior positions in the private sector, there is no appeal for them to acquire leadership positions

⁶ Tricia Yeoh, 'Women in the workforce', *The Sun Daily*, 15 January 2014, <http://www.thesundaily.my/node/237830>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Y-Sing Liau, 'Mothers Wanted Back in Workforce as Malaysia Seeks Growth', *Bloomberg*, 20 August 2014, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-08-19/malaysia-seeks-to-draw-women-back-to-work-southeast-asia>.

in the public sector.

- 2.8 To retain female talent and encourage women to step up to power, companies in Malaysia would be wise to update their welfare benefits. We elaborate more on this in Section 7.0.

3.0 Female representation in Malaysian politics

- 3.1 Gender inequality remains a pervasive problem in Malaysian politics:
- (a) Only 24 of the current 222 Members of Parliament are women, making up 10.8% of the Dewan Rakyat.
- (b) The Inter-Parliamentary Union's world classification on women representation in national parliaments places Malaysia at 156th of 193 countries.⁹
- 3.2 A total of 168 female candidates ran for parliamentary and state assembly seats in the 13th General Election (GE13). This is an encouraging 40% increase from the 120 female candidates in the previous election.¹⁰
- 3.3 **Table 1** below maps out the nominated and elected female candidates for Parliament and for state assemblies by political party¹¹ in GE13.¹²

Political party		UMNO	MCA	MIC	Gerakan	PBB & PBS	DAP	PAS	PKR	Total
Parliament	Nominated	10	4	-	2	6	4	7	11	44
	Elected	8	-	-	-	6	4	2	3	23
State Assembly	Nominated	32	13	1	3	-	18	19	18	104
	Elected	26	-	-	-	-	18	8	5	57

Table 1: Number of female candidates fielded and elected in GE13.

⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union.

¹⁰ Azyyati Ahmad, 'GE13: Women candidates performed better?', *Astro Awani*, 13 May 2013, <http://english.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/ge13-women-candidates-performed-better-14024>.

¹¹ Abbreviations used hereinafter are: United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH).

¹² Lynda Lim, 'Gender Think Piece: Malaysian Women's Entry into Politics', *Centre of Public Policy Studies (CPPS) Malaysia*, 2013, <http://www.cpps.org.my/images/articles/Gender%20Think%20Piece.pdf>, p. 6.

- 3.4 Women from both the ruling and opposition coalitions showcased the same competitive edge, as women from both sides secured 40 parliamentary and state assembly seats each. Barisan Nasional secured more parliamentary seats while Pakatan Rakyat secured more state seats.
- 3.5 Electoral success seems to depend less on whether a candidate is a man/woman, and more on which political party he/she represents. In other words, voter alignment by gender appears insignificant compared to alignment by party in Malaysia.
- 3.6 Additionally, the Asia Foundation observed that family-run political enterprises often serve as pathways for elite women to join the political arena, which leaves little space for ordinary women to enter the field. It is not unprecedented for the wives, widows, sisters, or daughters of former political leaders to pick up the reins.¹³
- 3.7 In a 2005 report on the political state of Malaysia, Maria Chin Abdullah stated that in the 2004 general election, 'the need to reform policies and laws were overshadowed by a so-called "broader political agenda." It is important to recognize the obstacles and limitations women face in participating in the political arena, a space limited by democratic boundaries and institutionalized patriarchal values in state machineries and political parties.'¹⁴

4.0 What our women MPs and State Assemblywomen say

- 4.1 Our interviews with five Malaysian women politicians showed a consensus that the core issues hindering female participation in politics are:
 - (a) The existence of a **cultural glass ceiling** in Malaysia for women in politics;

¹³ Anthea Mulakala, 'Where are Malaysia's Women Politicians?', *The Asia Foundation*, 13 March 2013, <http://asiafoundation.org/2013/03/13/where-are-malaysias-women-politicians/>.

¹⁴ Maria Chin Abdullah, 'Expanding Democracy, Enlarging Women's Spaces', in Beate Martin, *Gaining Ground?: Southeast Asian Women in Politics and Decision-making: Ten Years After Beijing: a Compilation of Five Country Reports*, 2nd edn., Quezon City, FES Philippine Office and the Southeast Asia Women Watch (SEAWWatch), 2004, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/04527/09-malaysia.pdf>, p. 89.

- (b) **Work-life balance** being more of an issue for women than for men; and
 - (c) Women politicians experiencing more **boundaries to being elected** compared to their male counterparts.
- 4.2 First, the **cultural glass ceiling** for women in politics. Despite there being no legal boundaries inhibiting women from taking up positions of power in Malaysia, YB Dr. Siti Mariah Mahmud (Kota Raja, AMANAH) identifies this “cultural glass ceiling” as being prevalent.¹⁵
- 4.3 The Asia Foundation’s National Youth Survey in 2012 found that more young women than young men would accept a female prime minister; overall though, only 50% of respondents were in favour of the idea.¹⁶
- 4.4 James Chin, a political science professor at Monash University in Malaysia, stated that women in ethnic Malay-based parties suffer from what he termed the “religious factor,” referring to local Islamic views on the suitability of women in leadership positions.¹⁷
- 4.5 A prime example of Chin’s statement is an incident in 2000 when the then Chief Minister of Kelantan and PAS spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat made international headlines for his comments discouraging women from running for parliamentary and state assembly elections for their own ‘security.’ He added that should a woman want to run for office, she would require her husband’s consent. She would also have to be over 40 years’ old, be childless, and have political experience.¹⁸
- 4.6 However, religion should not be a barrier for women in politics, as there are at least 13 states in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that have had women Prime Ministers or Presidents, including: Pakistan,

¹⁵ Siti Mariah Mahmud, interviewed by author, 9 March 2017, Kuala Lumpur.

¹⁶ Mulakala, Anthea.

¹⁷ Liz Gooch, ‘Halls of Power Narrow for Malaysian Women’, *The New York Times*, 28 August 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/world/asia/29iht-malay29.html>.

¹⁸ BBC News, *Islamic party rejects women MPs*, 9 June 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/784070.stm>.

Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Mozambique, Mali, and Gabon.¹⁹

4.7 Second, the issue of **work-life balance** for women. Despite their busy schedules, all the women politicians interviewed emphasised that they try their best to make time for their families. Their personal experiences are as follows:

(a) YB Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Permatang Pauh, PKR): After her husband was jailed, she had not much family time and had to go for prison visits and court cases. Her family tries their best whenever there is an opportunity to meet him.²⁰

(b) YB Nurul Izzah Anwar (Lembah Pantai, PKR): She drives her children to school whenever she can and picks them up. She is also fortunate to have a big family to lean on and to manage her children sometimes.²¹

(c) YB Fuziah Salleh (Kuantan, PKR): She believes she must not sacrifice her family in the process as work-life balance is so important. She always plans time for family, to cook for them and to spend time with them at least one weekend a month. She also tries to make time once a year for family holidays.²²

4.8 Besides sacrificing time with their families to work, women tend to be more harshly scrutinised than men by the public and in the media, forcing them to keep up appearances even in their own free time.

4.9 YB Hannah Yeoh, current Speaker of the Selangor State Assembly and State Assemblywoman for Subang Jaya, spoke about her personal experience as a prominent politician frequently in the spotlight: "I have lost my private life. There are things I can no longer do. I can't walk around my office in a sleeveless dress. I can't go out in shorts in public. Your life

¹⁹ Malaysian Digest, *Will We Live To See The Day A Female Prime Minister Runs Our Country?*, 27 January 2015, <http://www.malaysiandigest.com/opinion/539416-will-we-live-to-see-the-day-a-female-prime-minister-runs-our-country.html>.

²⁰ Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, interview with author, 15 March 2017, Kuala Lumpur.

²¹ Nurul Izzah Anwar, interview with author, 23 March 2017, Kuala Lumpur.

²² Fuziah Salleh, interview with author, 9 March 2017, Kuala Lumpur.

is no longer yours. It's no longer about what I want to do on a Saturday or Sunday. I have to put the people first."²³

- 4.10 Third, **boundaries to being elected**. People commonly hold preconceived notions about others and draw upon gender stereotypes, rather than judge based on individual worth.
- 4.11 In this case, women have more difficulty securing funds to contest in an election than do men. According to James Chin, most of those running and funding campaigns are men, who tend to support other men.²⁴
- 4.12 YB Fuziah Salleh believes the perception of women as being more compassionate than men should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. She added that women should adopt their own approach to politics, and commends the Leader of the Opposition, YB Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, for her leadership, 'for in her softness, there is strength.'
- 4.13 Refer to the Appendix for full interview notes.

5.0 What past policies have been discussed?

- 5.1 Here we acknowledge several initiatives that the Malaysian government has committed to in addressing this issue. These initiatives seek to advocate women's involvement in leadership roles and to ban gender discrimination in the public and private sectors. They include, but are not limited to:
- (a) The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),²⁵ adopted in 1979—an international treaty that lists out women's rights and obliges governments to ensure respect for these rights; and

²³ Hannah Tseow Suan Yeoh, interview with author, 22 March 2017, Subang Jaya.

²⁴ Gooch, Liz.

²⁵ United Nations (UN), *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>, 2009.

- (b) The United Nations (UN) Beijing Declaration²⁶ and Platform for Action,²⁷ adopted in 1995—an agenda for women’s empowerment aiming to accelerate implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, and to remove boundaries to women’s participation in all spheres of public and private sectors through equal shares in economic, social, and political decision-making.
- 5.2 As for civil society engagement, the Women’s Candidacy Initiative (WCI), was formed in 1998. WCI is a group of men and women seeking to advance women’s rights in Malaysia by increasing the number of independent female ministers in Parliament.²⁸
- 5.3 A particularly promising project was the UN Development Programme (UNDP)’s 2003–2006 collaboration with the Malaysian government, “Towards Achieving at Least 30 Percent Participation of Women at Decision Making Levels in Malaysia.”²⁹ However, no solid quota was put in place to ensure the realisation of that 30%.
- 5.4 The project’s long-term goal was ‘to ensure that governance reforms and institutional changes undertaken in the country will bring about the realization of gender equality, women’s empowerment and the promotion of women’s rights in public and political life, as envisaged in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment by 2015.’³⁰
- 5.5 However, it is now two years past 2015, and the above aspirations are nowhere near reality for Malaysian women. Although this project was

²⁶ United Nations (UN), *Fourth World Conference on Women: Beijing Declaration*, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/declar.htm>, 1995.

²⁷ United Nations (UN), *Fourth World Conference on Women: Platform for Action*, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>, 1995.

²⁸ Honey Tan, ‘Women’s Candidacy Initiative (WCI)’, *The Democracy and Governance Network*, 29 April 2009, <http://www.comminit.com/democracy-governance/>.

²⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Government of Malaysia: UNDP Project Document: Towards Achieving at Least 30 Percent Participation of Women at Decision Making Levels in Malaysia*, 2006, <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/malaysia/docs/WomenE/GenderProDocs/Towards%20Achieving%20At%20Least%2030%20Per%20Cent%20Participation%20of%20Women%20at%20Decision%20Making%20Levels%20in%20Malaysia.pdf>.

³⁰ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), p. 1.

initiated in 2003, it did not have a significant impact on the subsequent general elections. **Figure 2** below shows the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women between 2000 and 2016.³¹ This period covers the 11th, 12th, and 13th General Elections held on 21 March 2004, 8 March 2008, and 5 May 2013 respectively.

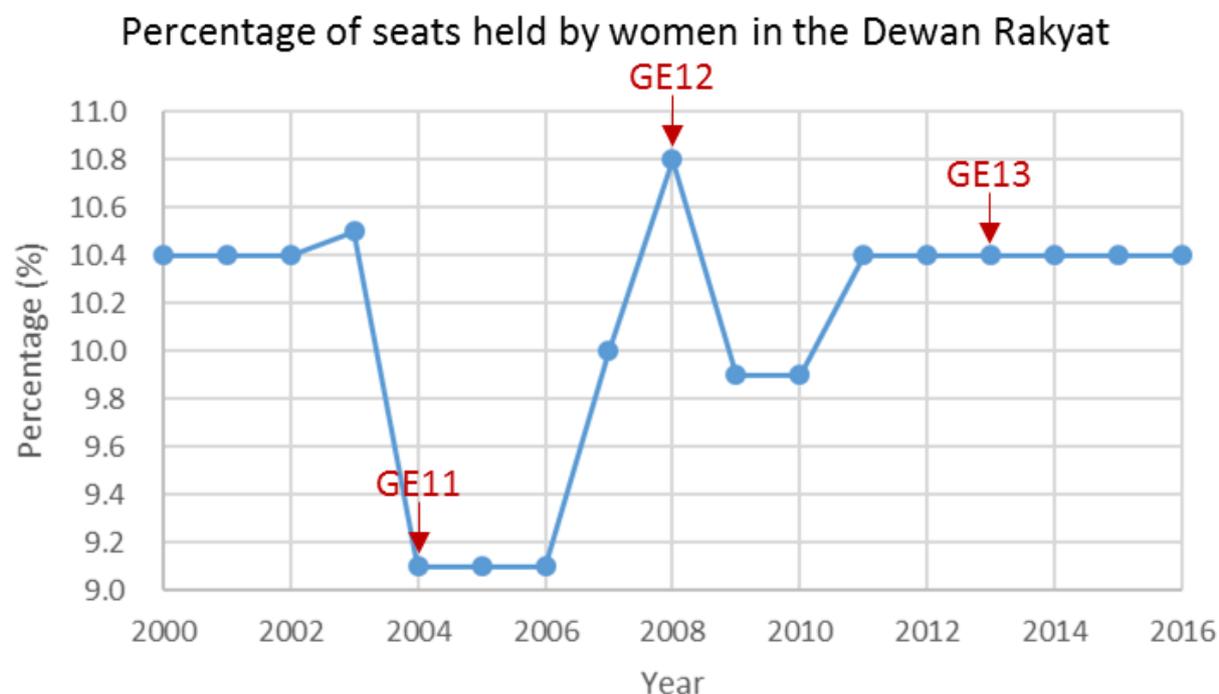


Figure 2: Percentage of women Members of Parliament in the Dewan Rakyat, 2000–2016. Data sourced from the Inter-Parliamentary Union's “Women in national parliaments” archive of statistical data, as of December each year. Years in which the 11th, 12th, and 13th General Elections were held are also indicated.

- 5.6 Results of the 12th General Election in 2008 indicated only a 1.7% increase in women elected to the Dewan Rakyat, from 9.1% in 2004 to 10.8% in 2008. It is unclear whether this slight increase was a result of the UNDP initiative, as the percentage of women in Parliament has displayed no constant trend over the years.
- 5.7 We believe that despite the comprehensiveness of the aforementioned initiatives, without concrete measures to ensure that these commitments come to fruition, it is futile for our government to pledge to these humanitarian causes in the first place.

³¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union.

6.0 Lessons from the Nordics

- 6.1 Every year, the World Economic Forum releases its Gender Gap Index Report, which quantifies the magnitude of gender disparities and tracks their progress over time, with specific focus on the relative gaps between women and men across four key areas: health, education, economy, and politics.³²
- 6.2 It is no surprise that in the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index rankings, four of the top five countries with the best gender equality are Nordic countries, with the exception of Denmark trailing behind at 19th out of the 144 countries ranked.³³
- 6.3 **Table 2** shows the top 10 countries with the smallest gender gaps in the world. This index is measured out of 1, with the highest possible score being 1 (parity) and 0 (imparity).³⁴

Rank	Country	Score (out of 1.0)
1	Iceland	0.874
2	Finland	0.845
3	Norway	0.842
4	Sweden	0.815
5	Rwanda	0.800
6	Ireland	0.797
7	Philippines	0.786
8	Slovenia	0.786
9	New Zealand	0.781
10	Nicaragua	0.780

Table 2: Top 10 countries as ranked by their Global Gender Gap Index 2016 scores.

- 6.4 In this list, Malaysia is ranked 106th of 144 countries, sharing a Gender Gap Index score of 0.666 with Guatemala. Surprisingly, our neighbouring country Brunei is ranked slightly higher with a score of 0.669.³⁵

³² World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2016*, 2016, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR16/WEF_Global_Gender_Gap_Report_2016.pdf.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

6.5 Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden's successes in closing the gender gap can be attributed to their strong emphasis on achieving egalitarianism. This is a cornerstone of the Nordic concept of democracy and policies for gender equality. We now explore their individual and collective efforts in pushing for gender equality in politics.

6.6 **Collective effort:** The Nordic cooperative programme on gender equality 2015–2018 is a regional collaboration between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland to increase gender equality. This programme contains specific guidelines to ensure gender equality overall.³⁶

6.7 Iceland:³⁷

(a) Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, Iceland's 24th Prime Minister, was their first female Prime Minister and also the world's first openly gay head of government. Her government enhanced gender equality by inserting gender quotas on company boards, advocating for the prevention of gender-based violence, making the purchasing of sexual services illegal.

(b) Political parties have voluntary party quotas, which has widened the debate on the issue of women's representation.

(c) The electoral system is based on proportional representation, which apparently delivers a significantly higher percentage of women members of parliament than others.

6.8 Finland:³⁸

(a) The women's suffrage movement in 1905 paved the way for universal suffrage in national elections and the right to be electoral candidates.

³⁶ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic co-operation programme on gender equality 2015–2018: Together for Gender Equality – a stronger Nordic Region*, 2015, <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:786318/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

³⁷ European Parliamentary Research Service, *Women in Politics: Background Notes on 12 countries*, 2013, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/eplibrary/EPRS-Background-Notes.pdf>.

³⁸ Eeva Raevaara and Susanna Taskinen, 'The Situation of Women in Politics: Finland', in *Women, Politics and Policies of Equality in Europe*, <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/xantippa/wee/weetext/wee252.html>.

Finnish women became the first women in Europe with the right to vote and first in the world to be eligible for election to Parliament.

- (b) In 1995, an amendment was made on the equality legislation with gender quotas added to it. Currently, at least 40% representation is required of both sexes in government committees, advisory boards, and corresponding bodies, as well as in municipal bodies and in administrative boards, boards of directors in agencies, institutions or municipal or state-majority companies.
- (c) The Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations for Joint Action (NYTKIS) is a cooperation network between women from different political parties and non-political organizations to offer new arenas to formulate gender-sensitive policies and to influence the conditions of making political agendas.

6.9 Norway:³⁹

- (a) The Gender Equality Act allows for moderate affirmative action as a measure for recruiting the underrepresented sex into management positions in the public sectors.
- (b) Implemented affirmative action schemes include a gender balance rule valid for publicly appointed committees, boards, and councils.
- (c) Since women were mobilised in women's organisations in the new feminist movement and in politics in the 1970s, women brought new issues onto the political agenda, including the right to abortion, public day care, the six-hour working day, and equal pay.

6.10 Sweden:⁴⁰

- (a) Between 1920 and 1935, women from the social democrats, the liberals, the conservatives and the agrarians formed their own women's

³⁹ KILDEN Gender Research News, *Gender in Norway: Power & Decision-making*, 2014, <http://www.gender.no/Topics/14>.

⁴⁰ Viivi Brunila, Baptiste Duguit, and Zena Iovino, *Women in Politics in Sweden*, <http://www.mv.helsinki.fi/home/holli/01sweden.html>.

party organisations, as they realised that the male-dominated political parties were hostile towards women and women's interests. The men tolerated this because they knew it was of strategic importance towards attracting female voters.

(b) The Swedish electoral system is a closed-list system with preferential vote and proportional distribution of seats (following the Saint-Laguë method⁴¹ for 310 seats). The proportional system increased female representation, but would have been futile without other efforts such as a rather women-friendly welfare state, mobilisation of women in political organisations and groups, as well as in the labour market and parties responsive to women's demands.

(c) Studies have shown that the characteristics of political parties directly influence women representation among the different parties. This includes a high level of institutionalisation, a localised level of candidate nomination, and leftist and post-materialistic values.

(d) In 1972, Olof Palme, Prime Minister at the time, gave a speech addressing the party's need to recruit and educate women. He stated, "It's true, as has been said, that women must fight for a place through their own strength, however that is not enough. It is a mutual responsibility for the entire workers' movement."

6.11 This paper believes that not all of the above initiatives are feasible in Malaysia. For instance, the Nordic Cooperation Programme on Gender Equality may appear comprehensible among Southeast Asian countries; however in reality, Malaysia and our fellow ASEAN countries differ far too much in their individual governance and policies to adhere to the same set of rules regarding women's rights. Additionally, ASEAN's principle of consultation and consensus-building means protecting their national interests tends to supersede enforcing a united stance.

6.12 However, Malaysia can still learn from some of the Nordic efforts. For instance, our electoral system can be changed from a plurality, first-past-

⁴¹ The Saint-Laguë method is a formula of electing candidates in political parties according to the proportion of votes won by that party. A more detailed explanation can be found here with New Zealand's government as an example: <http://www.elections.org.nz/voting-system/mmp-voting-system/sainte-lague-allocation-formula>.

the-post voting system to a proportional representation system, such as via the Saint-Laguë method, which has been shown to increase female representation in politics. Our political leaders could also lead by example and, like Prime Ministers Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir and Olof Palme, publicly advocate for gender equality in Malaysia. Norway's affirmative action policy could also be adopted in Malaysia to ensure that women play a part in decision-making roles.

- 6.13 Achieving significant gender equality in the Nordic countries was no easy feat; this is the result of a long process that took decades to manifest. Social policy reforms, pressure from women's organisations and networks, and efforts from within the main parties and the ruling governments were all essential to giving women equal opportunities. As most of these countries began the fight for gender equality with women's suffrage movements in the early 20th century, Malaysia still has a long way to go in achieving the same level of equality as these Nordic countries. Nevertheless, it is better late than never.

7.0 Recommendations relevant to Malaysia: in the workplace

- 7.1 Here we present specific recommendations to retain women in the workplace and thereby enable them to obtain positions of power. We use best practices in other countries as a preliminary guide for the Malaysian context.
- 7.2 Companies can first **expand maternity leave**. Canada's maternity leave policy reports that after giving birth, 86% and 93% of mothers return to the workforce within one and two years respectively.⁴² Canada and Malaysia differ vastly in the factors that affect employment after childbirth. These factors include but are not limited to: the length of maternity leave; the percentage of wages paid during maternity leave; and the availability of paternity leave. **Table 3** (next page) provides a direct comparison

⁴² Katherine Marshall, 'Employment after childbirth', *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1999, pp. 18–25, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/1999003/4682-eng.pdf>, p. 20.

between both countries.^{43,44}

	Canada	Malaysia
Length of Maternity Leave	17 to 52 weeks	60 days
Percentage of Wages Paid	55% for the first 17 weeks	100% for 60 days
Paternity Leave	Up to 35 weeks	Rare, but dependent on employer

Table 3: Maternity leave and paternity leave in Canada and Malaysia.

7.3 A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States (US) on Parental Leave and Child Health found that:

- (a) A 50-week entitlement to maternity leave is predicted to reduce post-neonatal fatalities by at least 20% and child mortality by 11–12%;⁴⁵ and
- (b) The cost per life saved is estimated to be \$2.6mil–\$4.9mil (in \$1997), suggesting the provision of parental leave may be a cost-effective method of improving health.⁴⁶

In comparison to this optimum amount of 50 weeks, Malaysia’s 60 days’ paid maternity leave is shockingly low.

7.4 Maternity leave has been shown to yield economic benefits:⁴⁷

- (a) Out of 253 employers surveyed in California, most reported that paid family leave had either a “positive effect” or “no noticeable effect” on productivity (89%), profitability/performance (91%), turnover (96%), and employee morale (99%);⁴⁸

⁴³ BabyCenter, *Maternity leave: essential information for planning your leave*, 2017,

<https://www.babycenter.ca/a1050634/maternity-leave-essential-information-for-planning-your-leave>.

⁴⁴ BabyCenter, *Maternity leave and paternity leave in Malaysia*, 2017,

<https://www.babycenter.com.my/a537568/maternity-leave-and-paternity-leave-in-malaysia>.

⁴⁵ Christopher J. Ruhm, ‘Parental Leave and Child Health’, *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series*, no. 6554, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w6554.pdf>, p. 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁷ Claire Cain Miller, ‘The Economic Benefits of Paid Parental Leave’, *The New York Times*, 30 January 2015,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/upshot/the-economic-benefits-of-paid-parental-leave.html>.

⁴⁸ Eileen Appelbaum and Ruth Milkman, ‘Leaves That Pay: Employer and Worker Experiences with Paid Family Leave in California’, *Center for Economic and Policy Research*, <http://cepr.net/documents/publications/paid-family-leave-1-2011.pdf>, p. 4.

(b) From that same survey of Californian employers, 86.9% of respondents said paid family leave did not increase costs, while 8.8% said they saved money by reducing employee turnover and/or by reducing their own benefit costs when employees used the programme instead or (or in combination with) employer-provided paid vacation, sick leave, or disability benefits;⁴⁹ and

(c) A separate study in New Jersey found that mothers who took paid maternity leave in the year after giving birth have been about 40% less likely to receive public aid or food stamps.⁵⁰

7.5 **Installing family-friendly facilities** is a simple yet effective way to help women juggle their family and career commitments. Beyond maternity leave, many Malaysian offices lack the proper facilities such as lactation rooms and day-care centres to accommodate new mothers. In the October–November 2016 Selangor State Assembly sitting, YB Yeo Bee Yin (Damansara Utama, DAP) expressed the need for lactation rooms in office spaces and pledged to launch a public restroom with nursing and breastfeeding facilities in the SS2 commercial centre.⁵¹

7.6 On the economic benefits of installing family-friendly facilities in the workplace, CIGNA Corporation, an American worldwide health services organisation, was commended for implementing a programme to eliminate worksite barriers that keep women from choosing to breastfeed and continuing to breastfeed after returning to work. The programme was implemented in 1995 and made the following impacts:⁵²

(a) Annual savings of US\$240,000 in healthcare expenses for breastfeeding mothers and children;

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁰ Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, *Rutgers Study Finds Paid Family Leave Leads to Positive Economic Outcomes*, 19 January 2012, <http://news.rutgers.edu/news-releases/2012/01/rutgers-study-finds-20120118#.WTEdoWiGNhF>.

⁵¹ Bee Yin Yeo, *My 2016 by Yeo Bee Yin*, 1 January 2017, http://www.yeobeeyin.com/2017_01_01_archive.html.

⁵² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), *Easy Steps for Supporting Breastfeeding Employees*, 2008, <https://www.womenshealth.gov/files/assets/docs/breastfeeding/business-case/easy-steps-to-supporting-breastfeeding-employees.pdf>, p. 16.

- (b) 77% reduction in lost work time due to infant illness, with annual savings for US\$60,000;
- (c) 62% fewer prescriptions resulting in lower pharmacy costs; and
- (d) Increased breastfeeding rates—72.5% at six months compared to the US national average of 21.1% for employed mothers.

8.0 Recommendations relevant to Malaysia: in the political arena

- 8.1 On the issue of increasing female representation in politics, a **gender quota** could be temporarily put in place and lifted once the quota is satisfactorily met. We propose a target of 30% female representation. This would ensure that a predetermined number of political positions are occupied by women and that virtually 50% of our population is adequately represented in decision-making roles.
- 8.2 The three types of quotas used in politics are:⁵³
 - (a) Reserved seats (constitutional and/or legislative) regulate the number of women elected;
 - (b) Legal or legislated candidate quotas (constitutional and/or legislative) sets a minimum for the share of women on the candidate lists as a legal requirement; and
 - (c) Political party quotas (voluntary) sets the minimum as a measure written into the statutes of individual political parties.
- 8.3 A quota system would be more effective in Malaysia if the Malaysian Parliament adopts a proportional representation system rather than the current first-past-the-post system. This would make it easier to insert the quota system if individual parties had more of a say in electing candidates.

⁵³ Drude Dahlerup, 'About Quotas', *International IDEA and Stockholm University*, 2009, <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>.

8.4 In more developed countries such as members of the European Union (EU) or European Economic Area (EEA), legislated and party quotas are widely used. As of 2013, only six out of the 30 EU/EEA countries do not implement any form of gender quota.⁵⁴

8.5 **Table 4** shows the effect of quota implementation in five EU/EEA countries, tracking the change through five elections since their implementation. The introduction of gender quotas does seem to have an immediate effect, even if other factors may have played a role. Compared to legislated quotas, party quotas tend to result only in gradual increases in the overall representation of women. Unlike legislated quotas, not all parties become bound by party quotas at the same time.⁵⁵

Country	Quota type	Election 5	Election 4	Election 3	Last election	Latest election	Difference (1–5) in percentage points
Belgium	Legal	1995: 12.0%	*1999: 23.3%	2003: 35.3%	2007: 36.7%	2010: 38.0%	+26.0
Slovenia	Legal	1996: 7.8%	2000: 13.3%	2004: 12.2%	*2008: 13.3%	2011: 32.2%	+24.4
France	Legal	1993: 6.0%	1997: 10.9%	*2002: 12.3%	2007: 18.5%	2012: 26.9%	+20.9
Germany	Party	*1994: 26.3%	1998: 30.9%	2002: 32.2%	2005: 31.8%	2009: 32.8%	+6.5
Sweden	Party	*1994: 40.4%	1998: 42.7%	2002: 45.2%	2006: 47.3%	2010: 45.0%	+4.6

Table 4: Female representation in the national parliaments of five EU/EEA member countries through five elections—before and after the introduction of quotas. Cells highlighted in pink indicate the first election after the introduction of quotas.

8.6 Nevertheless, regardless of the quota system used, the key to its success lies in the holistic approach of governments towards policymaking. In other words, creating a quota is insufficient; in the long term, we should focus more on seeking an entire cultural change in the perceptions towards women. Indeed, Finland and Denmark do not use gender quotas,

⁵⁴ Lenita Freidenvall and Emil Johansson, 'Electoral Gender Quota Systems and their Implementation in Europe', *European Parliament*, 2013, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/493011/IPOL-FEMM_NT\(2013\)493011_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/493011/IPOL-FEMM_NT(2013)493011_EN.pdf), p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

yet their national parliaments comprise 42.5% and 39.1% women representatives respectively, as of 2011.⁵⁶

- 8.7 YB Nurul Izzah Anwar (Lembah Pantai, PKR) agrees with the quota system. However, she believes that, 'We need to make it clear that a woman is there because she is deserving and has earned her place. More has to be done as well. Of course, not all women want to be politicians, not all women want to have successful careers; please respect the choices that they make.'⁵⁷

9.0 Conclusion

- 9.1 Gender inequality in everyday society and the lack of female representation in politics go hand-in-hand. By giving women equal opportunities overall, we concurrently make room for them to thrive in positions of power.

- 9.2 To achieve gender equality in politics, we have proposed the following measures:

- (a) Revising our current electoral system from a plurality, first-past-the-post voting system to a proportional representation system;
- (b) Inciting discussion on gender equality by having our political leaders publicly advocate the issue;
- (c) Implementing affirmative action policies in company committees, boards, and councils to give women a voice in decision-making roles;
- (d) Updating maternity leave benefits to paid maternity leave for a more optimal amount of 50 weeks, as opposed to the current 60 days available;
- (e) Installing family-friendly facilities, including lactation rooms and

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁷ Nurul Izzah Anwar.

childcare centres to accommodate new mothers returning to the workplace; and

- (f) Temporarily enforcing a gender quota in Parliament and the State Assemblies until 30% female representation is achieved, and revising this quota once the 30% is met.

9.3 As YB Nurul Izzah Anwar put it, 'a country that really focuses on its most marginalised is a country that has achieved a developed status, because that is truly the measure of how great a nation is, not how tall our Twin Towers are.'⁵⁸ Only by uplifting our women and ensuring that this 50% of our population are adequately represented will we ever truly succeed as a nation.

⁵⁸ Nurul Izzah Anwar.

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Appendix: interview notes

The notes below were taken as the author interviewed the respondents, who are referred to here in the third person.

YB Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail—Leader of the Opposition and Member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh

1. Have you always aspired to work in politics?

No, she was a doctor for 14 years before this.

2. Describe in short how you ended up here in your current position.

After the injustice to her husband, she felt that it was her duty and family honor that she take up her post and position. This is her struggle for justice for her country and for the future of all fellow Malaysians.

3. Has your job hindered you from other pursuits? (e.g. spending time with family and friends, traveling on holiday, other recreational activities)

Somewhat, after her husband was jailed, she had not much family time and had to go for prison visits and court cases. Her family tries their best anytime there is a chance to meet him.

4. Do you think there is a significant glass ceiling for women in politics in Malaysia?

Not only in Malaysia but even America hasn't broken the glass ceiling yet. [Hillary Clinton] is the first political president of the [Democratic] party as a woman, even though her circumstances are unique. Whereas, she herself is the first female Opposition Leader in Parliament.

5. Would you say work-life balance is more of an issue for women than it is for men?

Definitely more of an issue. Culturally, [women] are expected to handle family matters more than men. There was a tweet recently that a daddy is also a parent, not just a nanny because you take care. Prophet Muhammad even milked the cows, washed and cleaned for the household, so it's a shared role rather than expecting the woman alone to be a housekeeper.

6. Do you think there were more boundaries for you to be elected than for your male counterparts?

Her position is unique because she has had a lot of sympathy from people. However, generally as a woman, it is more difficult to break some barriers because of cultural settings and norms that we have accepted.

7. Apparently in Malaysia, different political parties have different processes for a woman to go through to be nominated, such as to join a women's wing. Is that true for your party?

For Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), you don't have to join the women's wing. You go on merit and also on women's representation.

YB Hannah Yeoh—Selangor State Assembly Speaker and State Assemblywoman for Subang Jaya

1. Have you always aspired to work in politics?

No, never until one month before elections, she was called to run as state assemblyman.

2. What was your first career choice?

Law but she also aspired to be a spiritual preacher and when she was younger, a newscaster.

3. Describe in short how you ended up in your current political position.

Came back from Australia after university and initially wanted to be a permanent resident in Australia but her PR application was denied. As such, she felt stuck [in Malaysia]. She practiced as a lawyer for 3 years but was unhappy and unfulfilled. One day, she went out for lunch with juniors and they complained about Malaysia over chicken rice. As Christians, at some point they realised they had to stop complaining and turn their thoughts into action. She then registered as a voter in 2007 and followed her friend to join a political party. She then ended up in Subang Jaya as a political candidate.

4. Has your job hindered you from other pursuits? (e.g. spending time with family and friends, traveling on holiday, other recreational activities)

Of course, she loses her private life. There are things she can no longer do. She can't walk around office in sleeveless dress, can't walk around in shorts. It's disrespectful to other people in our culture. Your life is no longer yours. It's no longer about what she wants to do on a Saturday or Sunday, she has to put the people first. She can't decide she doesn't want to do certain plans. She must go to conferences, follow a timetable, and basically live based on a timetable. This is what she has had to do for the past 9 years. That's the reason she doesn't put on makeup, because once she goes out in makeup, people will expect her to uphold that appearance, which is too much work.

5. Is there a prominent glass ceiling for women in politics in Malaysia?

It is more of an unspoken thing. People might not impose that on you but because of the nature of your work. However, you hit a glass ceiling on your own if you don't have a support structure. As a married women, and if your husband doesn't support you, strife will occur

because you can't do your job with joy. There are a lot of unspoken responsibilities that you have as a (working) woman.

6. Would you say work-life balance is more of an issue for women than it is for men?

Put it this way: if your child is sick and you are a man, it's okay, you don't have to be there for your child if your wife is around. But as a mother and your child is sick and you're not at home, you are automatically not a good mother. If the mother is not there, she is seen as horrible.

7. Do you think there were more boundaries for you to be elected than for your male counterparts?

Representing an urban place like Subang, girls have education and are well-equipped. She didn't see any barrier for herself or any disadvantage, as opposed to a man who's running for the same position. She does have other challenges and has to balance her time with her children because who she is as a leader is also measured against who she is as a wife and a mother. You have to almost have the full package to excel in what you do. Every day is a challenge. You can't be perfect, it's always a work in progress.

8. Apparently in Malaysia, different political parties have different processes for a woman to go through to be nominated, such as to join a women's wing. Is that true for your party?

DAP empowers women. For example, the party constitution's central executive committee must have 30% women. For you to make a constitution amendment means men will lose out, but they push through in DAP. The ruling government has a women's wing, but they are not in any way prevented from being nominated. They don't only have to be in the women's wing.

YB Dr. Siti Mariah Mahmud—Member of Parliament for Kota Raja

1. Have you always aspired to work in politics?

No, she started volunteering to contribute to the country after resigning from her job.

2. Has your job hindered you from other pursuits? (e.g. spending time with family and friends, traveling on holiday, other recreational activities)

She dreamt of redeeming her pension and catching up on her hobbies after work. She also used to feel guilty for taking time to herself outside her job, but recently realised she'd go insane without exercising enough and spending time with her family.

3. Do you think there is a significant glass ceiling for women in politics in Malaysia?

Legally there isn't a glass ceiling, but culturally there is. In Malaysia's existing system, it is more difficult for a woman and there are many interrelated factors in terms of moving up in politics.

4. Would you say work-life balance is more of an issue for women than it is for men?

Yes, work-life balance is more of an issue for women by nature. Women have more things to do for the family than men do. She is also not very socially inclined but because of her job, she had to learn to socialise. Otherwise, she'd like her alone time mainly to read.

YB Fuziah Salleh—Member of Parliament for Kuantan

1. Have you always aspired to work in politics?

No, she thought she'd never join politics because it's never reflected positively. However, she has always been an activist since she was a student. She worked with NGOs and was quite vocal as a student. She thought then that she'd do her bid to change the world from where she was by being involved with NGOs and civil society groups but there was a turning point when Anwar was sacked from office. This opened her eyes and she rethought whether she could still bring about change by merely being part of an NGO. In order to spur real change, she believed she'd have to be at the forefront. Since Day 1 that she entered politics, she has asked herself, "How do I be an agent for change in this platform, bring about a new brand and new approach to politics?" To redefine the politics she wants to bring, she would not continue the cycle of how people operated and used the "ends justify the means" excuse. She is very pragmatic, but she realized that she would not succumb to those principles and rebut them (instead). As a leader with Keadilan, she's developed "value-based politics" and developed a module end of her struggle to change civil society. There is a process, and reform is the agenda, not for the ends to justify the means. She wants to refute the politics being justified and she wants politicians live up to what they say, not only verbally but in their actions. However, to change is not easy, it will take one whole generation to really change.

2. Has your job hindered you from other pursuits? (e.g. spending time with family and friends, traveling on holiday, other recreational activities)

It is more challenging now, as politics is very demanding and her constituency is semi-rural. Her mindset is different however, she believes she must not sacrifice her family in the process work life balance is so important. She makes time-models, manages her time and prioritizes accordingly. She always plans to have time for family, to cook for them and spend time them at least one weekend a month. She also tries to make time once a year for family holidays.

3. Do you think there is a significant glass ceiling for women in politics in Malaysia?

The glass ceiling is not only in politics, but everywhere, a woman has to go above and beyond in order to be acknowledged the same (way) as a man. Women work so hard and are very passionate but men are very good at commanding attention, men lobby and don't do actual work, most women work and are committed to the actual performance. Women have to acknowledge their own strength and compassion and not be intimidated by the way men do politics because if women do that, women are not really executing their strength to the fullest.

Women need to believe in themselves and take their own approach. Look at Wan Azizah as a leader, in her softness there is strength.

YB Nurul Izzah Anwar—Member of Parliament for Lembah Pantai

1. Have you always aspired to work in politics? If not, how did you end up here?

Definitely not, for many years she was interested to become an electric engineer at Shell. After the 1998 sacking, political and financial crisis that hit Southeast Asia, it opened her eyes to act of activism. She worked alongside while studying SUARAM, and working with ABIM. It was valuable having a first-hand experience to understand what it means when you have an erosion on academic institutions and when the media is being abused. When you have executive signals to build influence. She feels so lucky because the most defining moment for her that gave her meaning was when she was an attendant at the international commission of jurists. They released a report on their fact-finding mission on three cases in Malaysia: Eileen Fernandez, Lim Guan Eng, and Anwar Ibrahim. The report was called “Malaysia: Justice in Jeopardy 2000” in collaboration with the international bar association. It was such a proud moment for her because it thought for her father, he was a victim who was innocent. She learned the important principle that you do things because it’s right, not just because you love someone or care about someone. Having these 3 personalities included in the report really made her understand how important it is to get involved. You can become an engineer, you can take part in any vocation as long as you never lose sight of what’s important, to fight for justice.

For her second term, she started off with a Human Rights angle, political civil liberties rights and moved onto actual campaigning during elections. Every university break, she would campaign alongside the opposition parties in 1999 under Barisan Alternatif. She took visits and trips abroad to universities to rally the students to support reforms because from the very beginning, she made it clear that it wasn’t just to fight for Anwar Ibrahim, but for his release as a political prisoner and other political prisoners and also implementing reforms in Malaysia, both political and economic. After that election, in 2004, she graduated the day after her father’s release. Having that degree and having been able to successfully obtain that degree was so meaningful because she was blocked from entering so many universities, such as the International Islamic University. Her father was initially the president of the university, as he fell from grace, although she had the results and necessary grades, they just said she was too much of a political risk to the university. So she could really empathise with the plight of many non-Malay students who perhaps had the best grades but could not gain entry into universities because of their race. The issue of equal opportunity really hit home. To the best of the government’s ability, she believes everyone should be given room for social and educational mobility.

In 2008, it was crucial to have a second generation who was supportive of reform and multi-racial parties because before that, it wasn’t “sexy.” Before 2008, nobody thought the multiracial

attitude of Keadilan was important, but Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was insistent from the very beginning that a party has to be multi-racial, all the way down to the grassroots level, to have Chinese and Indian presidents at the divisional level. Every meeting was conducted in a diverse multi-racial manner. It was such a new concept because the existing parties were either predominantly Malay or only Chinese. They were really starting something that was interesting and essential for the future of multiracialism in Malaysia. After she gave birth to her firstborn, the decision from her party was for her to serve Lembah Pantai and she thought every one of us has to take the viewpoint that we are soldiers in war and we have to respect the decision made by the Supreme Council, which was why she went ahead with that plan and won the shocking win against probably the most popular female minister in that particularly year. By 2013 elections, she was also very lucky to have had very strong polling agents who formed the first line of defence against the flaws in the election system and biased conduct of the election commission with heavy gerrymandering that took place all over. Now, Lembah Pantai is probably one of the most gerrymandered districts that has moved more than 20,000 voters outside and inside. She realised that they really rigged the system to ensure a loss for her.

2. Were you involved in Malaysian politics even while you were studying at Johns Hopkins in the US?

No, because in Johns Hopkins, it was a one-and-a-half-year Masters programme that was really intense. It was actually a two-year program, but her father was insistent that they finish in a year and a half and return to Malaysia thereafter to continue the fight. That was 2005, and in that period, she was completely a student and had fun. It was really important because every person that has the ability to pursue tertiary education is really privileged. Of course we want it to be a right, however, only 25% of Malaysians are actually able to get to the tertiary level. This emphasises the importance of pushing forward and doing your best for your community.

3. Has your job hindered you from other pursuits? (e.g. spending time with family and friends, traveling on holiday, other recreational activities)

Yes, she had to grow up very fast. However, her plight is not unique to her and there are of course many other people around the world who have faced many challenges and have had to grow up fast as well. Of course, she does spend quality time with her family. She drives her kids to school whenever she can and picks them up. She thinks the thing she misses most is the time with her father. They come from a very loving close-knit family. He has been in prison for nearly a decade all together. Having him taken away at 18, she was lucky to have had that much time with him. Although he was busy as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, he would spend time with her family to have dinner with them. It was a big hit however, they are lucky they dealt with the challenges relatively well. They are always mindful that they are not alone and there are many others who have faced similar challenges. She just met with Kak Lailah, her husband was Mat Samad Satreh from a very famous case where he was arrested. She fought against the Internal Security Act and they were separated for 7 years. In the end, there were no charges. She used to read the love letters he sent to his wife. That's why it's

important to understand in our hardships and challenges, we are never alone. There are many others worse off too. That's why we have to always persevere and not think that it's our own burden. It's important to push for change on all fronts because we don't want anybody else to be unjustly penalized. She also is lucky to have a big family to lean on and manage her children sometimes. The point is, it is important to have that kind of relative comfort knowing there are people to have your back when the time comes.

4. Do you think there is a significant glass ceiling for women in politics in Malaysia?

Glass ceiling, definitely. She thinks it's important to know that we have about 10% female representation in parliament, which is rather pathetic. We need to understand one thing, for a country like Malaysia, where female graduates form a whopping 60% in domestic universities, we have such capable women, yet we're quite far behind Singapore in terms of providing welfare and childcare centers. Even in parliament, these are basic needs. She had to fight to get a breastfeeding room and the funny thing is, only members of parliament are allowed to use it when all women should be allowed to. We are so archaic in terms of policies to allow women to join in the workforce. More needs to be done, we have to make it easier for women to join the workforce. Why does it have to be shaped to fit the needs of a man rather than for women to have more secure families that will have more time to spend with their loved ones as well as be the best and increase productivity in the workforce.

5. About improving welfare for women in Malaysia, what do you think about YB Yeo Bee Yin's State Assembly speech on the need for lactation rooms and how several State Assemblymen were not taking her seriously because she was talking about breastfeeding?

This is how toxic the political scene is in Malaysia. We have a Prime Minister and government that has politicized everything from education to healthcare to subsidies. The only way for politicians to get covered is to talk about really big political issues. There is no standing committee. Why is RUU355 being talked about everyday rather than the Sexual Offenses Against Children's Act? Children in Malaysia are being abused everyday, whether it's in Johor or Kelantan. There is no sense of urgency. For her, it starts with the politicians. She tried to ask the women's minister when they are going to table the bill, and was told that it's up to the cabinet. She believes a country that really focuses on its most marginalised, our women and children, is a country that has achieved a developed status. Because that is truly the measure of how great a nation is, it's not about how tall our Twin Towers are. So yes, she thinks they need to push further, people need to take women seriously, including the media. Our children are the most victimised and abused, like in the Richard Huckle case. Referencing one of the major non-governmental organisations working on children who are being sexually abused, in the 17 years that this social worker was working, every case she brought forward did not end with successful discussions, so it's a serious issue. As for the environment, there are many sexual jibes. There is less respect for the role of women generally. However, it is important for

not only female MPs, but also male MPs to push back for an environment that demands respect for women.

6. And do you see that happening right now?

Well, there is currently a certain degree of outrage. However, it is a problem that they don't have a proper gender-select committee. They have Azalina managing the women's caucus but she thinks that has been dead for months. Again, when everything is based on political control, why is it not made a committee but just a caucus? These are things that need to be addressed.

7. According to UN Women, only 11% of Malaysian parliamentary seats are occupied by women. This places Malaysia around 150th out of 185 other countries in terms of female leadership and political participation. Do you think this is mainly because Malaysian women are not given enough opportunities in this field, or because the women themselves are hesitant to pursue roles in politics due to cultural reasons? Or perhaps a mixture of both?

In 2012, there was an amendment to the parliament standing order to ban offensive and sexist remarks. However, institutional changes are not sufficient if they are not holistic in the culture and practice in society. After last year's cabinet reshuffle, only 3 out of the 35 full ministers are women, all of whom were already incumbents. Looking at Trudeau's government in Canada, he makes it a point to create a gender-balanced team. We need this especially in Malaysia, as we have so many successful women, we have the numbers in our hands with our graduates. It is quite fair to acknowledge that in business and in the way political patronage works in Malaysia, it is like an "Old Boys' Club." In her meetings with the female Members of Parliament from the green party, everything would have to be put back through their superiors. As for Keadilan, they have a female president, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. They also have female vice presidents. So they decide. With the issue of achieving 30% women in Parliament, in terms of putting quotas in place, it is a supply and demand issue too. We need to make it clear that a woman is there because she is deserving and earned her place so quotas can sometimes be a problem, more has to be done as well. We need this put in place for even basic things because not all women want to be politicians, not all women want to have successful careers. Please respect the choices that they make; respecting means having a conducive environment in, where to leave their children when they go to work or as a homemaker. These are the things we can put in place to respect women.

8. So you don't think we should assign a fixed number of positions specifically for women?

Well, she thinks a quota is necessary for now, but it should be revised for the long run. There is the importance of coaches, women have to be supporters of other women. Sometimes, we forget what we can do. When she sees homemakers, she sees women who are facing financial difficulties, a lot have lost their husbands. She feels that they are ordinary women who have to be defended. It's not just about women on boards in companies, they are important in the

boardrooms, she isn't saying they're not, but equally important is the average woman who is perhaps economically marginalised. They need further assistance. These are the women that are crying for help, so she hopes that when they talk about policymaking, it's a basic level, childcare centres and supporting them. We need to make sure we address the issue of homeless and making sure there's no difference whether you're a Malaysian woman or a refugee. We need to have a certain standard to adhere to when addressing the rights of women.

9. Do you think there were more boundaries for you to be elected than for your male counterparts?

For Keadilan, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim spearheaded the move for every candidate and prioritised the youth as well as women to become political candidates. Equality has always been a priority in their party.