INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW,
GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNICATION
(IJLGC)
www.ijlgc.com

WOMEN AND MALAYSIAN POLITICS: CHALLENGES AS MEDIATORS IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract:

Effective governance in a democratic country needs the leadership of qualified people, who have acquired knowledge and experience to lead a nation. On this backdrop, the governance should strive to ensure that the political leaders to be selected are not just competent but able to exercise leadership in an inclusive way. However, in Malaysia, gender bias has been an issue that has raged on, particularly during the phases of elections, where women are considered to face numerous challenges with regard to political leadership. This paper explores the main challenges that women encounter as mediators in political leadership within Malaysia's democratic governance. The research highlights that women in Malaysian politics have to meet substantial obstacles relating to gender disparities, bias and discrimination, media stereotyping, and balancing family responsibilities against their political careers. Societal norms generally depict women as fit for domestic duties but not for national leadership, thus giving people the beliefs that gender equality is relevant within, but not outside, the domestic sphere. Because of deep-seated stereotypes and indirect forms of discrimination, the end results have been low self-esteem and motivation among women with the aspirations to take up leadership roles. In that regard, implementation of empowerment initiatives, gender equality measures, and comprehensive legislations should be considered to break these barriers that challenge women's participation in political leadership, hence challenging the deep-rooted practices and norms categorizing them as subordinate to men in political positions.

Keywords:

Political Leadership, Gender Equalities, Malaysia, Women

Introduction

Background Of The Study

The participation of women in political leadership in Malaysia is not only a matter of equity but also a crucial element for the advancement of democratic governance (Ramli et al., 2024). For decades, Malaysia has been in the midst of heated debate related to gender equality and the need for inclusive leadership (Zahari et al., 2024). Nevertheless, despite their growing presence in business, education, and civil society, women's participation in Malaysian politics remains surprisingly low. This kind of disparity highlights an essential lacuna in the quest of the country to attain actual gender parity.

The low participation of women in Malaysian politics cannot be attributed to an insufficiency of competence or lack of ambition amongst women but is merely a symptom of profound, entrenched societal and institutional barriers (Haque et al., 2020). Cultural norms and deeply-set traditional gender roles ordain that leadership—especially the political kind—is men's preserve. These norms are further instilled by patriarchal structures that exist in both the public and private spheres, deterring women from seeking political careers. In addition, the political sphere is challenging to all, especially women, by reasons such as gender bias, discrimination, and managing family with the demands of political life. Women in Malaysia have broken many barriers in most other areas, making history and paving the way. Women occupy key positions in institutions of learning, run successful businesses, and make meaningful contributions to social and economic development; this has not been replicated in political power. Then, there was the adoption of the quota system, which reserved up to 30% of corporate boardroom positions for women—a pointer to realization toward striking a gender balance (Karim, 2021). That said, the zeal with which they pursued this has not been the same zeal with which the case for representation in politics has been pursued, thus keeping women fringes at contestable levels.

The underrepresentation of women in politics is a problem not just of numerical constraint; it is a vista that looks at the quality and inclusiveness of governance. Women's participation in policy-making is important, particularly in issues to do with education, health, social welfare, and gender justice (Baqutayan, 2020). These are areas where women are more likely to have special insights and priorities different from those of men. By keeping women out of leadership roles, such vital issues may not get the heed that they deserve and result in policies that truly do not serve all citizens' needs. This thus complicates the situation of women in facing political challenges due to a lack of mentorship and support networks compared to men. Indeed, as in many other countries, male-dominated networks in the political landscape of Malaysia control all access to any resources, opportunities, or power. Women, on the other hand, have to overcome them with little or no support. In most cases, they seem to work twice as hard to receive a portion of the respect and acknowledgement their male counterparts receive.

Through this research specific attention will be brought to the challenges that Malaysian women face in their attempt to be mediators and leaders in the political environment. In these challenges, the research aims at an in-depth look into the barriers to women's political participation and advocates for targeted strategies geared toward empowering women in political leadership. These include, among others, implementation of more robust gender quotas, creation of mentorship programs, and policies for work-life balance of women involved in politics. This study finally concludes and contends that involving women in political leadership is not a matter of being 'fair' but a requirement for the building of a society that is

more just, equitable, and democratic. This will ensure that women have equal opportunity to participate in shaping the country's future, where their voices are heard and contributions valued in all aspects of governance as Malaysia moves forward.

Historical Context

The political history of Malaysia is deeply rooted in its colonial past and consequent national identity. Since independence, late in 1957, male leaders have dominated the Malaysian political landscape, with women being virtually left out of the picture (Stivens, 2020). The very framework of politics that was developed in its formative years was one where patriarchy loomed large and women naturally found themselves given roles at the periphery. Embedded as these norms were in cultural and social expectations, leadership was conceived as the exclusive preserve of the male. This served to lock women out of playing a full role in the political sphere.

Colonialism Inheritance and Political Systems after Independence

The colonial administrative system reinforced the status quo ante the dominance of men in public and political spheres, while women were consigned to household roles. Schooling in the Western manner and modern economic organization arrived at this period also, so that the gender divisions built into these new systems had the effect of preparing girls for wife and household goods. This dramatically limited the prospects for women in professional and public life and crystallized patterns that characterized Malaysian society into the present at the same time. Thus, as it emerged into independence, the political institutions were newly formed, but the gender biases were not. Male-dominated political parties, like the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), provided role models for political leadership, with women pushed increasingly to the periphery of meaningful positions in government (Azmi et al., 2024). These biases were replicated in the Alliance Party and later in the Barisan Nasional, where there was a stress on male leadership and women would be relegated to ancillary positions in party structures (Mohamad, 2018). This political structure thus institutionalized the notion that leadership and governance were for men, thus erecting formidable obstacles against which women would labor and seek entrance into the political fray. Women were supposed to remain home and care for the house while men were natural born leaders, thus leaving little in terms of an open opportunity for women to break in and attempt to manage the political realm.

Early Pioneers: Breaking Ground In A Male-Dominated Landscape

Yet within those limitations, several progressive women emerged to the very foreground of Malaysian politics, challenging the status quo and laying the bedrock for coming generations of female leaders. One of the prominent personalities is Tun Fatimah Hashim, the first female minister appointed in Malaysia and holding a post as the Minister of Welfare Services in the year 1969 (Welsh, 2019). At first, this role was gender-ridden, meaning her ministerial portfolio confined her to a stereotypically female role within the ministry that effectively dealt with welfare and family services. However, Tun Fatimah did use the position in implementing radical reforms that included the establishment of the National Planning Family Board, which facilitated the process of population control as well as improving the maternal health.

In phenomenal ways, the contributions of Tun Fatimah were challenged by the then-dominant norms based on a patriarchal societal structure condemning women's roles to mere caretakers in the domestic sphere. Her success was a proof that indeed, women can lead and manage sectors as important as those of government; given the chance, they could influence and help

shape the development trend of the nation significantly. Her legacy continues to inspire future generations of women leaders in Malaysia.

Tan Sri Aishah Ghani was another woman who came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s (Zakuan, 2013). The first female member of UMNO's Supreme Council, Aishah, was initially treated with solicitude by male colleagues who felt the sharing of power with women was more than a decade ahead of its time. But with strategic thinking and the right kind of maneuvering, she managed to win the argument for more female representation and women's voices in the decision-making processes of the party. Aishah's involvement was in upraising the socio-economic status of women, mainly through policies supporting women's employment and education. She was also one of the supporting figures at the front of constituting the National Council for Women's Organizations (NCWO), which boomed as a good platform for advocating women's rights and pushing towards policy changes benefiting women across all sectors (Zakuan, 2013). Aishah's career illustrates how difficult it is for a woman to penetrate the echelons of male-dominated political institutions. Her success and fortitude in fulfilling rights for women highlight as a prime example of the need for a woman's presence in the echelons of power to be able to command and make changes from the system. Her legacy serves as an inspiration for women seeking to make their mark in the political arena.

The Evolving Role Of Women In Contemporary Malaysian Politics

Modern Malaysia has witnessed women performing the dual roles of mediators and leaders with great interest in the political arena (Ramli et al., 2024). Within this context, mediation involves an ability to navigate the complex web of political, social, and economic issues in order to build consensus toward inclusive governance. With skills like empathy, interpersonal communication, and critical thinking, women are better positioned to be effective mediators. These contributions are useful in the Malaysian society with diverse cultures where, for political stability and progress, balancing between different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups is paramount. These developments notwithstanding, the participation of women in Malaysian politics is still far from being on an even playing field. Women currently hold about 13.5 percent of parliamentary seats, which is only slightly higher than previous decades and still clearly shows the case for gender imbalance (Balakrishnan, 2023). This underrepresentation speaks to the continuity of societal attitudes and structural barriers toward the full political participation of women.

One of the core challenges to women's political participation in contemporary Malaysia is entrenched gender bias within political institutions (Elias, 2020). While women are increasingly more present in politics, they remain largely confined to issues and roles perceived as an extension of their traditional responsibilities related to social welfare, education, and healthcare. These positions, although important, have been found to possess less prestige than that of positions in economic or defense ministries, which remain male-dominated. This segregation reinforces the stereotype that women are less able to deal with the more "serious" aspects of governance.

Institutional barriers are not all that women in Malaysian politics face. There are large challenges in regard to media representation (Rajaratnam et al., 2020). Stereotyping in the media thus presents an important avenue through which public perceptions about women in politics are cultivated. The media tends to judge female politicians more by their gender, ethnicity, and private life rather than by their policy initiatives or leadership skills. For example,

Hannah Yeoh is a woman who recently rose to become the Speaker of the Selangor State Legislative Assembly and then the Deputy Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development in contemporary Malaysian politics (Zakuan, 2022). Her career has often been shadowed by discourses over her gender, ethnicity, and religious background. Yeoh's career was overshadowed by her gender, ethnicity, and faith—further proof of the chauvinism that characterizes Malaysian politics.

Media portrayals of women in politics are dominated by the fulfillment of traditional gender roles, as female politicians are described in relation to their roles as wives and mothers rather than leadership roles. The type of reporting reinforces dangerous stereotypes that have women making a choice between family and career or, worse still, that their value in public life is of secondary importance to their domestic roles. It also results in the devaluation of their political work because the hypersexualization of female politicians makes them an object of close observation due to their appearance and not due to their intellect or leadership qualities. Such portrayals demean individual achievements and perpetuate the broader belief in society that women are less able or suited for leadership roles.

Social Media and the Digital Age: New Platforms, Old Challenges

For women in Malaysian politics, the advancement of social media has brought new challenges. With broadened democratization, social media provides avenues on information and opens ways for public engagement. However, it is also playing a role as an incubator for sexist and derogatory content. Women politicians are at the receiving end of online harassment, often given threats and hurling abuses that their male counterparts remain relatively immune to. The anonymity provided by social media has given way to unchecked sexism, hence a no-go zone that deters women from actively participating in any political discourse.

The immense power the social media holds in shaping public opinion will be very evident in a country like Malaysia with a large proportion of its population influenced by the mediums. The single most important risk that has to be overcome in women's political ascendancy is that faster-than-ever misformation and sexist rhetorics transform the Web. While golfing down negative stereotypes, this attack against women in leadership diminishes the credibility of female leaders. But women in Malaysian politics surge forward despite all odds, using these very platforms to push for change and amplify voices in a male-dominated arena.

One very good example of how social media can turn out to be a boon and a bane for women in politics is that of Nurul Izzah Anwar, more commonly referred to as the "Princess of Reformasi." She occupies centre stage, having been at the helm of political reform in the country alongside her father, Anwar Ibrahim. However, being in the limelight on social media has made her a target for sexist attacks and derogatory comments that mostly focus on appearance or personal life rather than political achievement (Hamid & Abdul Rahman, 2018). Despite this, Nurul Izzah has used social media to engage her constituents, advocate reform, and challenge sexist narratives to her credibility. The case of Nurul Izzah serves to echo, like many other female politicians, the two-edged sword that social media can be. While it provides a platform for women to challenge the status quo, it also puts them under scrutiny and harassment, which can be extremely challenging to withstand. The impact of social media on women in politics mirrors wider societal challenges deeply anchored in gender bias and resistance to change.

The Ongoing Struggle for Gender Equality in Politics

The history of Malaysian politics shows the slow but candid struggle of women who have to face patriarchy. From the era of great leadership led by Tun Fatimah Hashim and Tan Sri Aishah Ghani to the recent challenges faced by current women leaders like Hannah Yeoh and Nurul Izzah Anwar, the struggle of women in Malaysian politics has always been about breaking barriers. While there has been some real progress, especially in increasing women's participation and influence, so much more remains to be done to achieve real political gender equality. The conspicuous one is in the implementation of gender quotas in the political institutions, areas where despite some successes, representation lags far behind the global average in Malaysian politics. Much more can be done in terms of gender quotas in Malaysia to ensure that there is not just a mere trickle of women through the doors and to ensure that the voices of women are thus represented in decision-making processes.

It is also necessary to make the political institutions themselves family-friendly. It is one of the well-known facts of life: the challenges women face in balancing family and political careers are very well documented. Responses to challenges include an enabling work-life balance environment where flexible working arrangements are supported, childcare arrangements made, and societal expectations that disproportionately place caregiving responsibilities on the shoulders of women challenged. By opening up the political sphere to women leaders, Malaysia would allow more women to participate in politics and contribute to the nation's development.

The women leaders in Malaysia are revolutionizing the political landscape and leading the way for a more inclusive future. For this change to get deeper traction, there are needs for women, civil society organizations, and political parties to increasingly come together to address systematic and societal barriers which exclude women from full and equal participation in political life. For starters, this simply means calling for strong gender quotas and combating stereotyping in the media, but also for nurturing a political environment more sensitive to women's leadership. Women can truly shape the future only if such issues are dealt with directly; for without that, Malaysia itself will never find a political landscape where it does not just boast of women as participants but as leaders in shaping its future.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework
In this regard, the feminist and intersectional theories are the foundation of this literature review to provide a proper understanding of impediments and challenges that women are met with in political participation. These theoretical perspectives criticalize the lens through which it is possible to view the supposedly structural inequality which persists within Malaysian politics and the way these are compounded by factors such as race, class, and religion.

Feminist theories not only oppose traditional notions of political participation but also imbue more meaning into the idea of "descriptive representation", as put forward by scholars like Anne Phillips and Iris Marion Young (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). In Malaysia, women are underrepresented among the hierarchy of political machinery, and their issues have not been recognized as part of a fully integrated national agenda. According to feminist theories, structural changes, like gender quotas, would further disrupt male dominance in political decision-making and promote more gender-sensitive policies.
Intersectionality interrogates various forms of oppression that intersect, as is obtainable in a socio-politically diverse society such as Malaysia (Hardy-Fanta, 2013). Ethnicity and religion

are powerful elements in determining social and political identities; therefore, intersectionality is key in outlining the challenges that women encounter in accessing politics. Policies that appear sex-blind may vary differently between groups of women. This school of thought involves multiple approaches that put into consideration the unique challenges of various groups ensuring a more equitable political platform.

Women And Malaysian Politics

Political involvement makes sure all the citizens' ideas and interests are well represented in governance; it therefore follows men and women are supposed to perform this role. There are at least two strong arguments why sharing political spaces by women is important: intrinsic and instrumentalist arguments (Baqutayan & Abd Razak, 2022). Women, who form over half of the world's population, therefore have a global claim to equal involvement and representation as a matter of human rights. This is based on an equality-based argument, which claims that any political system denying women opportunities to participate in decision-making is inherently unjust. An instrumentalist argument, on the other hand, asserts that experiences, ideas and political concepts are generally greatly influenced by gender and social roles. A good example would be the fact that she focuses on issues such as healthcare, education, and social welfare, while a man primarily focuses on economic or defense policies. By virtue of this fact, the general expectation is always that women, when they get into political leadership, will carry these varying foci and values and result in a more informed comprehensive and inclusive process. The inclusion of women in politics should also be seen to have governance impacts, especially on reduced levels of corruption articles more responsiveness to the needs of citizens. The road to equal share of seats taken by women in politics can either be slow or moving at a faster rate, depending on the appetite of politics by the method and the strategies applied. This can be done through gradual or greater rapid approaches. Gradual approaches can be increasing women participation is through voluntary quotas. It can also increase by political parties many female candidates. More rapid approaches can be the legislated quotas or establishing reserved seats for women in Parliament just like the one that happened in countries like Rwanda and Mexico (Rosen, 2017).

Women need to politically be empowered their empowerment and political involvement has been a great talk for long. And, even though the term "women's empowerment" was coined much later, it was well understood that women needed to be empowered already in the struggle for the right to vote. The initial suffragist movements of the world proceeded from the understanding that only political power is able to guarantee all other rights of women—namely, the right to education, employment, and property (Edwards & Roces, 2006). Globally, women represented 49.584% in 2019 (World Bank, 2019). Though most countries globally have tried and continue to better the status of women, the position of women is still faring badly in the political arena. Women account for 48.6% of Malaysia's population (World Bank, 2019), but their representation is only 11.5% in the State Legislative Assembly, 14.4% in the House of Representatives, and 19.4% in the Senate—ranking the country 140 out of 192 around the globe in terms of women's political representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019). The gap shows there must be concerted efforts to ensure more women's participation in politics.

A 2020 study by Ipsos revealed that Malaysians feel it important to see the representation of women in government and politics as promoting women's empowerment (IPSOS, 2020). This is found on the fact that women bring in the essential perspective necessary for solving problems unique to them, including violence against them, discrimination, and access to unequal resources. However, the low number of female political candidates in Malaysia itself

accounts for the fact that the way to achieve this kind of representation is at worst filled with barriers. From data from the All-Women's Action Society and PantauPRU15, in the last general election, out of 7.3 million women making up 50.4 percent of the registered voters, only 251 out of 2,333 candidates were women (Abidin, 2022). It proves that even when women constitute nearly half of the electorate, they remain disproportionately low as political candidates.

Malaysia is rather progressive for women in relation to most of these aspects of gender equality and women's empowerment, except for its political standing, which is seriously behind. Women hold only 10.76 percent of ministerial positions, for example—a huge imbalance in gender in the highest levels of the government. The Global Gender Gap Index 2024 places Malaysia at 114th out of 146 countries, far behind neighboring countries like Singapore at 48th place, Thailand at 65th place, and Indonesia at 100th place, as asserted by Abdullah (2023). While Malaysia has been shown to perform well regarding women's access to health and education, its political representation of women remains less than impressive, consistent with the notion that other areas of gain have not translated into political power for women (Indramalar, 2024).

	106	China	0.684	+0.005	+1
	107	Mauritius	0.683	-0.006	-9
	108	Uzbekistan *	0.681	n/a	n/a
	109	Senegal	0.679	-0.001	-5
	110	Gambia (Republic of the)	0.679	+0.028	+9
	111	Vanuatu	0.673	-0.004	-3
	112	Tajikistan	0.673	+0.001	-1
	113	Angola	0.668	+0.012	+5
	114	Malaysia	0.668	-0.015	-12
	115	Tunisia	0.668	+0.026	+13
	116	Bahrain	0.666	-	-3
	117	Nepal	0.664	+0.004	-1
	118	Japan	0.663	+0.016	+7
	119	Comoros	0.663	-0.001	-5
	120	Burkina Faso	0.661	-0.015	-11
	121	Côte d'Ivoire	0.655	+0.005	+1

Figure 1: The Global Gender Gap Index 2024 By The World Economic Forum

(Source: Kusum Kali Pal et al. (2024)).

Measures toward enhancing women's political participation have to be taken in terms of closing the gender gap and ensuring respect for the rights of women in the political process (Elias, 2020). The task is multifaceted, focusing on national and local levels, with activity on the part of the government, political parties, civil society, and the private sector. A safe and enabling environment has to be created in which women can participate in politics without fear of physical violence, emotional abuse, or online harassment. Inevitably, it points to the creation of an enabling environment as incumbent for increasing the participation of women in politics and for the retention of those participating.

According to McKinsey Global Institute, investment in women's education and empowerment is extremely rewarding not only to individual women but also to families, communities, and nations at large (Indramalar, 2024). It is recorded that once women are empowered, they are likely to and able to invest in the education, health, and general welfare of their children with prospects that are very bright for the coming generations. Moreover, companies with women on their boards have higher returns on investment, suggesting that gender diversity also brings in better decision-making and hence corporate governance (Abdullah et al., 2016). Evidence from other studies suggests that greater women's participation in politics is associated with increased investment in social infrastructure—like education and healthcare—benefiting society as a whole (Elias, 2020). This is reinforced by other evidence: achieving gender balance in politics actually could almost double the world GDP growth by 2025 because of the balance in the workforce (Johansson et al., 2012). Indeed, the potential economic impact of the same underlined the necessity of integrating the gender perspective in all levels of governance and policy-making. With regard to this, efforts towards the empowerment of women should therefore be further enhanced and intensified by the long-term strategies under Malaysian Plan in both social and economic contexts.

Women's participation in the election varies across the country, as illustrated in **Figure 2**. In constituencies such as Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, the percentages of female candidates were very high, reaching 25% and 33.34%, respectively, during the 2022 elections. Opportunities for women's political participation have been greater in these areas and are arguably driven by higher educational levels, urbanization, and access to resources. However, in most states, the number of female candidates is still very low, with percentages varying between 3.03% and 17.74%. Data like such reinforces the call for more women's involvement in politics not only at the central but also at the local level, to enable a more widespread representation in processes of political decision-making in Malaysia.
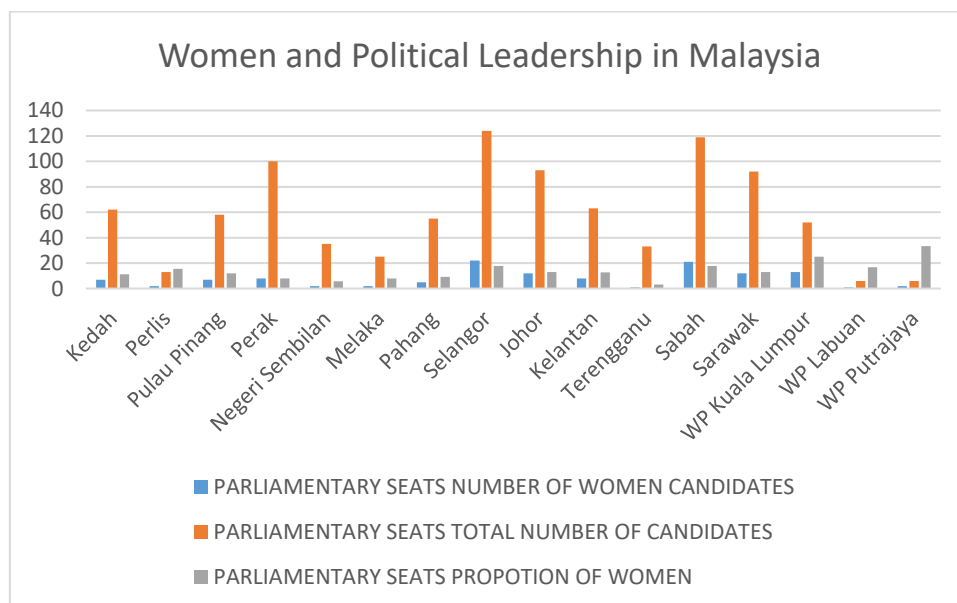
Figure 2: Percentage of Female Candidates in Elections by State in Malaysia in 2022

(Source: USAID (2023))

While the country has advanced in many aspects, there remain many challenges for Malaysian women's political participation. This will only enable more women to voice out and have their

interests put first once there is an opportunity to take up political offices and decision-making positions. Serious political will and collaboration among all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, academia, the media, local communities, and private sectors, are required to realize this. It has to be a combined effort of them all to make a more just and equal society so that gender equality is a lived experience than an ideal premise.

Challenges Affecting Women As Mediators In Political Leadership

The challenges at stake to political leadership in women from Malaysia are steep, complex, and multifaceted: this is mainly because of the vast influence of patriarchic culture generally prevalent in the country. This culture normally regards the major leaders to be in the hands of men; women are perceived as better placed or are best-fit for other non-political roles in society. Contributing factors for any woman struggling to break into and move up the political ladder include religion, education, socialization, discrimination, social perceptions, biology, and environment (Elias, 2020). In fact, one of the most formidable hindrances to the political participation of women in Malaysian society is the patriarchal culture. It is happening because, traditionally, the value system rotates around the dependence and dominance of men coming forward as family and community heads, while women are to pay attention to household matters only (Salleh & Mansor, 2022). In the political context, these perceptions can work against the provision of support and opportunity for women to play any significant role in political decision-making. For instance, a woman who becomes assertive in political discussions earns herself the reputation of being aggressive or unfeminine, a factor that does not encourage her to be a leader.

Further, though the National Policy on Women (Charlton & Everett, 1989) may have been designed to empower women in national development, the majority of its implementation processes have not realized the set targets (Ahmad & Ghani, 2016). A good example is the 30% quota allocation for women in political decision-making, which does not easily come out or even maintain the same percentage. The challenge cited above means that the political system in Malaysia needs reform, and also, there is a perpetual necessity to rectify the issue of gender imbalance in politics.

The account of the accomplishments by women in Malaysia politics means that there is significant advancement in uplifting the number of women who are present in political arenas. However, they still see themselves equalizing thousands of challenges that stand in their way. Among these, powered political structures that are still maintained by men remain one of the main challenges (Salleh & Mansor, 2022). This structure so very often leads to a status quo that benefited and is bias towards men, who hold key posts and make political decisions while women have to work much harder and do more to create a reputation and gain trust to take part in political activity and hold top posts in politics.

Women also face therefore have to encounter moral and ethical issues in politics. This has at times made the political language be slanted in favor of males and thereby ignorance of or demeaning discharges sometimes accompany women in debates or arriving at decisions (Way & Lai, 2023). It accounts for why women are ever fighting with the political agenda if they are to realize change in society. Indeed, it is through women's politics that they have to operate in a society where their contribution is not taken seriously as men take their achievements and concomitant perfidiousness in replacing their competence. This poses a double pressure to the women, in that they have to prove that they are capable and, at the same time, face bias that subjects them to having no clue of what they are doing in the political arena.

Another significant challenge is the idea of society being not ready to give women all that it should in terms of politics. As society is more aware that women's status does need being reinforced, stereotypes are often applied perceptions in women's public life. Since efforts for the change of societal views towards recognition of the very active roles of women in shaping the country's future are continuous, this embraces public awareness campaigns and reforms in education in general—this is so that the levels of acceptance of women in leadership may be much higher with the future generations.

For the realization of women as mediators in political leadership, strategic steps are called for. The urge to create more opportunities that would involve women in the decision-making process, formulate policies encouraging balanced gender representation, and ensuring equality in social and economic access to fields should be accompanied by education and awareness for developing women's aspirations and courage to participate in politics, ensuring their offerings are recognized and valued in line with proportionality. In doing so, Malaysia will definitely and progressively move to bridge all the gaps between the sexes in every walk of life.

In terms of their role as mediators in politics, the presence of women becomes crucial as they bring along inclusive perspectives and different values into an arena of mostly male domination. Women usually focus on those issues that get less attention or which are oft-neglected during political decision-making processes: education, health, social welfare, and gender justice. This is important for bringing all segments of society on board and fairly representing their interests in national development.

Key Challenges Faced By Women As Mediators
The first challenge to women mediators is the power imbalance in most political structures. Nearly all political institutions are male-dominated, hence threatening the involvement of women. Again, women are often shut out from the same networks, resources, and mentorship opportunities accessible to men, which places them at a disadvantage.

While Malaysia has put in place the National Policy on Women to advance the empowerment of women at every level of national development, its practice is still far from satisfactory. Greater commitment is needed for the achievement of the 30 percent quota of women in political decision-making. Societal attitudes toward the role and capabilities of women in politics should shift—of course, their inputs are priceless in the building of a society much more just. Public campaigns, education, and media representation can alter these perceptions and pave the way for an enabling environment for women to enter politics. What Malaysia needs in promoting the role of women as mediators are strategic steps: increased public awareness, sufficient training and support, and decreased obstacles to their growth. Malaysia will therefore attain actual gender equality in every field of political and social life.

Women And Global Politics: A Comparative Overview
Participation of women in political matters is of essence globally. Justification of women participation can be argued on intrinsic and instrumentalist grounds as seen previously. From a human rights perspective, women constitute more than half of the world's population hence there is a need for equal participation and representation. The instrumental argument posits that since women offer diverse ideas and perspectives because of their gender and roles, they bring different values pivotal for all rounded governance. This has seen countries across the world

apply different methods in trying to raise female political participation. The Global Gender Gap Report 2024 by the World Economic Forum ranked countries like Iceland, Finland, and Norway at the top with regard to gender equality; this encompasses political participation (Kusum Kali Pal et al., 2024). Much of the success in these countries can be attributed to gender-sensitive policies like gender budgeting and parental leave that support women participating in politics.

The Role Of Gender Quotas: Lessons From Rwanda And Mexico

Gender quotas are among the most efficient measures for bringing more women into political life. Classic examples are Rwanda and Mexico. In Rwanda, there was an introduction of gender quotas that required at least 30% of parliamentary seats to be held by women, and now women occupy more than 60% of seats in the country's Parliament—the highest percentage worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020). Mexico's electoral reforms ensured gender parity in the lists of political parties' candidates, boosting women's representation. These examples demonstrate that gender quotas can be powerful mechanisms for advancing women's political representation; however, such measures prove successful in the broader political and cultural context. In Malaysia, gender quotas may balance out the disparity in the representation of women, but it will call for a slew of other complementary reforms to support this change.

Challenges In Implementation: The Case Of India

Although gender quotas have have met quite a good deal of success in most countries, they are also constrained by different factors. For example, Panchayats in India have a reservation system for women at the local government level where 33% of the seats are reserved for women, thereby increasing the participation of this gender at the grass root level (Jayal, 2006). But the policy effect has been mixed and that many women continue to face constraints due to lack of education, social and cultural constraints, and limited space of decision making.

India's experience highlights that while gender quotas are crucial, they are not a panacea. It is not enough to increase the numbers of women without making the necessary social and educational reforms that can make them effective participants in decision-making. For Malaysia, the use of gender quotas must be a part of a larger strategy in combination with education and a public awareness effort to invest in the development of women leaders.

The Impact Of Socio-Cultural Practices: Malaysia And The Philippines

This acceptance of socio-cultural norms as a means of shaping larger participation is another reason why the Philippines ranks among the countries with female leaders for the longest period of time (Hauser, 2017). The country led by women presidents, senators, and congresswomen. Being cognizant of the essentiality of a rule of law and independence of a democratic nation, the country was poised for gender equality in its society, sufficient female role models, and supportive legal frameworks.

The Malaysian case, however, continues to be characterized by high levels of patriarchy. Though women constitute almost half of the country's voters, their proportional presence in political bodies remains minimal. This contrast hence indicates women's political empowerment as a factor that Malaysia needs to overcome with gender stereo-typical socio-culture barriers. It cannot change with legal and policy amendments alone to reach gender equality in politics. The societal mind-set towards women leadership has to change with the

help of education, media representation, and public dialogue that goes against the current norm of traditional gender roles.

Economic Empowerment And Political Participation: Experiences From Bangladesh

Economic empowerment translates closely into political participation. In Bangladesh the microfinance initiatives of Grameen Bank have resulted in the economic empowerment of millions of women and have therefore enhanced their social and political strength (Hasan et al., 2019). Women participating in microfinance programs are more likely to participate in community decision-making and run for local office.

The Bangladeshi experience, and that of Malaysia, also supported economic empowerment as the foundation for political participation. All efforts to enhance the role of women in politics in Malaysia, therefore, have to coincide with those targeting the improvement of the economic situation of women. This may involve opening the educational and economic space for women and expanding the possibilities for entrepreneurship, so that women can enter the political struggle on equal terms.

Combating Violence Against Women In Politics: Insights From Latin America

More broadly, violence against women in politics is a global phenomenon, constituting one of the key impediments to women's participation. Countries like Mexico and Bolivia have tackled this through serious legal structures that cover women from political violence (Htun & Jensenius, 2020; Rogers, 2019). Such laws would define violence against women in politics as a separate crime and create mechanisms for reporting and accessing justice. It is with the introduction of such laws that it becomes all the more safe for women to dabble in politics, making the person who perpetrated the crime accountable. This could make Malaysia a safer place for women in politics by reducing violence and harassment against female politicians.

Discussion

A range of challenges that women are facing as they try to achieve equity in Malaysian politics is listed herein with a description of solutions that hold the potential to fix the problem. Though women are more involved in Malaysian politics today, there has always been a great gap in the male-dominated political structure. Women's participation in political processes needs to have an increase through targeted interventions which involve more inclusive political education, actual gender quota implementation, and comprehensive support systems for female politicians.

The Need For Structural Reforms And Gender Quotas

Thus, the most powerful way by which women can be quickly included in politics is through the establishment of gender quotas. Gender quotas can require a minimum percentage of female candidates in elections or even within political party ranks to ensure adequate representation of women in decision-making. Successful quotas have been implemented in countries such as Rwanda and Sweden, increasing female political representation severalfold. Indeed, gender quotas have ensured that women take more than 60% of parliamentary seats in Rwanda—a staggering example of the effect of policy.

Quotas, if equally introduced in Malaysia, would bring about an elevating change. This will apply to parliament, local councils, political party positions, just to mention but a few of these vital political entities. For instance, a legally enshrined 30% quota for women in all political

organs will indeed alter the gender calculus in politics in Malaysia, advancing the cause of women in mainstreaming their perspectives in policymaking.

Together with this should be the institutional legislative reforms that deal with obstacles to women's upward mobility in political careers. Those include protection from gender-based violence and harassment in politics, making sure a lady can contest and work in office of choice without threats on life. For example, the legislation related to sexual harassment and violence against women in politics, as in Mexico, would create a better environment for female politicians in Malaysia. These need to have efficient enforcement mechanisms accompanied by public information programs in order to succeed.

In addition to the above recommendations, reforms should be oriented toward more transparent and merit-based systems of political appointments. It would help disperse the male-dominated networks that are usually excluding the women, thus finalizing appointments on the bases of merit, and no on who knows whom or in terms of gender. All of this reform is said to require strong political will as well as a concerted effort from the government and the political parties down to the civil society. The development of criteria for clear political appointment and pushing for more transparency can move Malaysia to a more fair political landscape that recognizes capabilities and gender diversity.

Educational Strategies For Gender Equality
Education is at the root of societal attitudes toward gender roles and can serve as a vehicle to bring about gender equality in politics. Malaysia has to seriously invest in educational initiatives aimed at empowering women and challenging customary gender norms. Such initiatives need to begin at the level of primary and secondary education.

There is the need to have education on gender equality introduced in schools so that attitudes in society can be changed right from a tender age. These are, for example, educations aimed at destroying stereotypes on harmful perceptions in gender and creating an ideology that leadership and political participation are roles for both men and women. In this way, the reformation of curricula should include lessons on the history of women's rights, the importance of gender equality, and the important contributions of women to various fields like politics. This strategy will not just sensitize the youth on the aspect of gender equality but also encourage young girls that leadership can be a profession for them.

In the second place, academic and training programs for ladies and girls regarding leadership must be initiated. The contents of the programs could teach public speaking, policy analysis, and other leadership parameters such that they develop enough confidence and abilities to become part of political functions. Malaysia can ensure incremental growth in women's political representation by preparing the next generation of female leaders. This may also be achieved through mentorship programs that would match students with female role models in politics and therefore integral to developing ambition and resilience in young women.

At the higher education level, universities should offer courses and degree programs focused on gender studies, political science, and leadership. These programmes would offer development and practical experience during internship opportunities in political offices that would provide women with the requisite skills and connections with the political sphere.

Providing scholarship and grant opportunities that would alleviate some of the financial burdens of women who aspire to enroll in the civil service are also helpful.

Best Practices In The World For Gender Equality

Malaysian politics should learn from global best practices in the strive for better gender equality. Some lessons can be drawn from countries that have successfully enhanced women's political participation for the Malaysian context in drawing a strategy where by many of the structural and cultural obstacles to women's political participation are covered. An example that Malaysia might want to borrow from, for instance, is Rwanda's success in raising legislative quotas that have seen women representation in parliament. This Rwandan model shows that what is important is just a legal framework that mandates gender representation, coupled with strong political will to enforce such laws onto the population. Malaysia could also borrow a leaf from this method by adopting such a quota and ensuring that there are mechanisms of enforcement coupled with political will in executing the same. There are several lessons that can be drawn for the Malaysian context from the case of Sweden, with regard to the integration of gender perspectives through all aspects of policymaking, including gender-sensitive budgeting and policy analysis. These practices ensure that women's needs and perspectives are considered in every aspect of governance, which eventually leads to an inclusive and fair process of decision making. For instance, gender-sensitive budgeting may be considered as the following: However, gender-sensitive budgets analyze how government budgets serve men and women; an effective way to ensure that resources are concentrated on efforts that promote gender equality and women's empowerment was found in Finland. That answers why more and more countries have been earnestly moving towards gender equality through work-life balance policies that help both men and women, as seen in Finland. This is where parental leave, flexi-work policies, and cheap childcare come in handy; these will ensure that women can, therefore, work in politics without neglecting their families. Malaysia can, therefore, come up with these policies that will promote the idea of women participating in politics since these will ensure that the women of Malaysia can balance their work and personal lives through ease in the equal distribution of functions.

The Role Of Mentorship And Support Networks

In line with the initiation of policy and educational reforms, there is also an urgent need with the establishment of mentorship and support networks to help women become better empowered. Such mentorship programs can provide the necessary guideline and support system to an aspiring female politician in this complex political landscape. These need to be adopted at both the national and local levels, where senior female politicians mentor young women who have an ambition to take up public service. They can provide valuable advice in overcoming hurdles, network-building, and how to organize campaigns—thus improving chances for any aspirant woman politician to succeed.

The shortcoming of informal support networks among women in politics should also not be underrated. Space could be provided in which experiences could be shared, mutual support given, and activities coordinated to positively influence gender equality. The very establishment of such networks within political parties and among various levels of government would grant more power and influence to women in Malaysian politics. Hand in hand with this support comes emotional and psychological networks, which are important in keeping the women going in political life and sustaining their resilience. Furthermore, these will also be part of collective platforms for advocacy to effect changes in policy and reforms

that are beneficial to female politicians and the community. These networks can harness solidarity and cooperation for women in politics to ensure that their voices are more powerful on the political platforms.

Public Awareness And Media Campaigns

Public awareness campaigns present a key factor in the actual realization of gender equality and increase in women holding public offices. Such campaigns should address traditional gender roles in society and give examples of successful women in politics. Media is a powerful driver of public perception, therefore it is essential to use all possible channels from television and radio to social media and other platforms in conducting awareness campaigns. Effective media campaigns could change the societal perceptions of the possibility of having women leaders that can motivate other women to venture into a career in politics to begin with.

Effective campaigns like the 'HeForShe' movement initiated by UN Women bear fruits in the participation of not only women but more so, men in the gender equality campaign (Ponton, 2022). A similar campaign can be undertaken in Malaysia to demonstrate to people that political leadership is not limited to any gender and that a woman is as capable as any man in ruling a country. This campaign needs to target young audiences through the use of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to reach Millennials and Generation Z. These campaigns, through engaging and interactive content, would be able to instill a culture of gender equality in the young generation. Moreover, media organizations need to be urged to encourage gender-sensitive reporting —reporting on women politicians focusing on their professionalism instead of personal life or appearance. Not only this, media organizations can help bring women's challenge in the politics front and centre—awareness among the masses and mass support to start intervention to change viewership.

Women In Mediating Political Leadership

Women are involved in making mediation processes fair, equal, and an overall process of inclusive politics. Normally, women incorporate their unique perspectives and varied values into the political negotiation process, thus finding more holistic and sustainable solutions to complicated issues involving different sections of society. Women can solve from various angles of the problem, and so they can result in more innovative and effective policies from which a greater number of people derive benefits.

An important dimension of women as mediators is the potential they harbor in terms of improving dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders. The women leaders tend to have a collaborative leadership style of mutual solutions, and this highly applies to the prevailing political atmosphere, which is always tense and filled with conflict. For example, female leaders are believed to insist on consensus-building and conflict resolution in their striving to gain more stable and integrated political spaces.

More to that, women as mediators can focus on issues that are at the peripheries of political decision-making; among these are varied concerns ranging from family welfare, global education, reproductive health, and the larger gender justice concept, which most often falls first in the bundle of female mediators. Men in such decision-making positions do not tend to align policies with such issues.

By bridging the gap between the government and the grassroots, women share the drive and concern of the ordinary citizens with their leaders, thus the decisions made by the leaders will be based on shared interests. In a country such as Malaysia, which is highly ethnical and cultural diversified, besides being faced with tough social challenges, the duty of women mediators is quite paramount this is a factor since through them, it is the value of justice, equality, and togetherness that are fundamental in a modern mutualistic and developed society can be embraced active way.

Strategic Interventions For Wider Gender Equality
In combating these challenges and capitalizing on the role women have played in mediation, Malaysia has to take strategic actions towards the enhancement of laws and the protection of women's rights in politics, raising public awareness of the principles bases and need to include women, and creating equal opportunities for women to walk into all areas of political and social life. These measures could be through better laws to shield against gender-based violence, distribution of political resources in a gender-neutral manner and efforts in making all spheres of public life gender-equal.

The second category of interventions through mentorship and network building and public awareness campaigns make the atmosphere more supportive. By integrating global best practices and focusing on educational reforms, Malaysia can develop a holistic strategy that can remedy both what people are currently facing and pave the way for a more inclusive political future. This must be delivered through a range of coordinated actions by government agencies, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and the media. Additionally, the gender equality agendas need constant monitoring and evaluation to measure progress and point out areas of weaknesses. This will enable Malaysia to be kept on track towards greater gender parity in politics through the establishment of benchmarks and routine evaluation of the efficacy of policies and programs. In doing so, Malaysia can establish a political environment that can empower women to take the helm and do their fullt implicit towards the growth of the nation.

Conclusion
The role of women in Malaysian politics has evolved, but huge challenges persist. Underrepresentation in political offices, entrenchment of patriarchal values, and structural barriers still hamper any meaningful increase in women's participation in politics. This paper, however, has managed to identify clear and actionable pathways to get rid of those stumbling blocks. If global best practices are integrated into Malaysia's political sphere, it will be easier to enable the adoption of gender-sensitive policies and a more inclusive political culture.

The Future Outlook: New Trends In Malaysian Politics
Contending with the issue of gender equality, several emerging trends can have a great deal of impact on the future prospects of women in politics. The first potential line of growth is that of growing civil society and political institutional awareness and activism for women's rights. This includes organizations such as the All-Women's Action Society, which work toward shifting cultures and changing public perceptions to make it easier for more women to join politics. Increasingly, digital platforms and social media open up new spaces for advocacy and activism. They amplify women's voices in breaking down sexist norms and challenging political leaders. With rising digital literacy, these tools are likely to form an increasingly important part of shaping political landscapes and challenging traditional patriarchal norms.

The political scenario will also undergo a change with more women taking over as leaders of various political parties. Though in a minority in today's political life, their variability in the percentage of crucial decision-making positions is an indicator of a better balance in the sphere in the near future, which may be further expedited in cases of gender quotas. More finally, the warrants to representation in political decision-making institutions will be a reality, and women can add values to the policy-making arena.

An increased contribution of women to Malaysian politics can lead to wider societal changes. Research conducted in any country on the matter reveals that women who hold positions of responsibility emphasize social welfare, education, health care, and gender justice—matters often overlooked where men dominate the political atmosphere. With more women engaging in politics, these issues are likely to get much more attention, eventually promoting fair policies for societal good. In addition, more women in leadership may challenge stereotypes and further chip away at entrenched ideas as to what leadership looks like. In this way, this perception change can motivate a young woman and help bring about a culture of gender equality right from her formative years. Over time, this greater engagement of women could lead to a vastly more peaceful and stable society because it is well documented that the chances of conflict and violence are reduced in a nation by greater gender equality.

A Visionary Dimension: Into A Future Of Gender Equality
The future of women in Malaysian politics holds great promise. It is only with the right policies, cultural shifts, and sustained advocacy that Malaysia will join the ranks of leading countries in Southeast Asia on gender equality. No single sector—government, civil society, political party, and private sector—is capable of achieving this vision alone. To achieve this vision, some of the major steps include implementing gender quotas, providing education and mentorship programs, and developing a political culture that respects female leadership. Yet, even as many challenges remain to be surmounted, there is tremendous potential for transformation. Indeed, there is an auspicious future in Malaysian politics for women. With continued effort and commitment, Malaysia will strive towards real gender equality where women assume their rightful place in the political arena and build a more just, fair, and prosperous Malaysia for all citizens.

Acknowledgement

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