

# Reassessing Women's Political Participation and Leadership (WPPL) in Malaysia

## Breaking Barriers, Securing Buy-In

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The research project is led by a team from the Research and Library Division, Parliament of Malaysia. The team combines academic expertise and professional experience in policy analysis, governance, and legislative research. Their work focuses on producing evidence-based studies that strengthen the Parliament's role in informed decision-making, support policy deliberations, and contribute to enhancing institutional effectiveness and accountability.

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## Abbreviation

<b>AMANAH</b>	Parti Amanah Negara
<b>BERSATU</b>	Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia
<b>CEC</b>	Central Executive Committee
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>DAP</b>	Democratic Action Party
<b>GE - 15</b>	15th General Election
<b>GPS</b>	Gabungan Parti Sarawak
<b>IPU</b>	Inter-Parliamentary Union
<b>MCA</b>	Malaysian Chinese Association
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PAC</b>	Public Accounts Committee
<b>PAS</b>	Parti Islam Malaysia
<b>PBM</b>	Parti Bangsa Malaysia
<b>PH</b>	Pakatan Harapan
<b>PKR</b>	Parti Keadilan Rakyat
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>VAWP</b>	Violence Against Women in Politics
<b>WPPL</b>	Women’s Political Participation and Leadership

# Executive Summary

This study examined the barriers, party practices, and strategies that shaped women's political participation and leadership (WPPL) in Malaysia after the 15th General Election (GE15). Drawing on interviews with the Members of Parliament (MPs) across different parties, the study explored the structural, institutional, and cultural factors that affected women's path to leadership. Furthermore, the study investigated the changes experienced by the political parties in Malaysia.

## Key Findings

### 1. Persistent Barriers Despite Progress

Although more women were fielded as candidates in GE15, the overall number of women elected to Parliament remained low (approximately 13.5%). Many of the challenges to contest in the election were structural. Women still faced limited access to resources, party support, and winnable seats. Male-dominated norms within political institutions continued to limit women's chances of moving from participation to leadership.

### 2. Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP)

A growing concern was the rise of gender-based harassment, particularly online. Female MPs shared experiences of being attacked for their appearance, marital status, or credibility. Some women described severe psychological abuse and smear campaigns. While existing parliamentary rules discouraged sexist behaviour, enforcement was inconsistent. Many women relied on personal resilience, rather than institutional protection, which showed the urgent need for stronger safeguards and clear complaint mechanisms.

### 3. Internal Party Mechanisms

Currently, most political parties have women's wings, training programmes, or leadership initiatives. These efforts show genuine interest but have produced uneven results. Candidate selection remained the key hurdle since women were often placed in tough or marginal constituencies, while men were given safer ones in their early years. Some parties, such as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), performed "headhunting" to bring in professional women (and men) leaders, while others relied on long-term grassroots grooming. Female MPs stressed that being tested in competitive seats strengthened credibility, but lasting reform would require leadership commitment and fair opportunities across the board.

### 4. Role of Male Allies

Male MPs played a crucial role in supporting women's advancement. The study found positive examples of male allies who championed women speakers during campaigns, backed their nominations, or promoted gender equality within party structures. Nevertheless, for change to last, this support must move from personal goodwill to institutional practice.

## 5. From Targets to Real Change

Many parties adopted the 30% women's representation target, but most treated it as aspirational rather than binding. Progress will require:

- clear rules and enforcement mechanisms;
- fair placement in winnable seats; and
- active leadership support from party presidents and whips.

In short, women are ready to lead, but the structures that allow them to compete and succeed on equal terms are missing.

## Recommendations

Strengthening WPPL requires action at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

### Macro Level – National and Legislative Framework

- **Legislate a binding 30% quota for women candidates**, with clear penalties for non-compliance, and explore new systems, such as Top-Up Women-Only Additional Seats (TWOAS), to increase representation
- **Appoint more women to the Senate (Dewan Negara) and strategic public positions**, including boards and commissions
- **Create a political party fund for women's empowerment**, rewarding parties that meet the 30% target and support leadership training
- **Strengthen the women's parliamentary caucus** to act as a bipartisan platform for gender equality and leadership development
- **Collect and publish gender-disaggregated data** on political representation and leadership roles
- **Adopt Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)-endorsed gender-sensitive parliament practices**, including training and internal codes of conduct
- **Run nationwide civic education campaigns** to promote public understanding of WPPL

### Meso Level – Political Parties and Institutions

- **Include gender quotas in party constitutions** and monitor them transparently from the grassroots to the national level
- **Place women in competitive, winnable constituencies** and key decision-making roles—not just symbolic posts
- **Avoid internal competition between women candidates** and instead support them to contest viable seats

- **Allocate resources for mentoring and leadership training** to prepare emerging women leaders
- **Encourage and institutionalise male allyship**, turning informal support into structured party policy

#### **Micro Level – Individual Capacity and Culture**

- **Encourage visibility at the grassroots level**, such as volunteering in constituency offices to gain experience
- **Promote civic and political education** for young women to build early interest and confidence
- **Foster mentorship and peer support networks** that bridge gender lines
- **Provide digital literacy and online safety training** to help women navigate cyber harassment and strengthen their online presence

## **Way Forward**

Malaysia's women leaders have the experience, interest, and ability to lead. Currently, they are lacking fair opportunities and institutional backing. Real change is imminent when gender equality moves beyond political pledges and becomes part of everyday party practice and governance. By combining strong laws, inclusive party structures, and empowered individuals, Malaysia can create a political environment where women's leadership is normal, not exceptional. This environment is also where both men and women work together to shape a more equitable democracy.

# Introduction

## Background

The equal participation of women in politics is not only a matter of fairness but also a foundation of legitimate democracy and effective governance. When women are represented, laws and policies better reflect the realities and priorities of society. A balanced House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat) enhances the quality of debate, strengthens public trust, and ensures that national development is inclusive and sustainable. Evidence worldwide shows that parliaments with stronger female participation are more responsive to social issues, such as education, health, welfare, and equality.

Globally, this principle is affirmed through key frameworks. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) urged governments to adopt measures, including temporary special measures, to achieve a critical mass of women in decision-making. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Malaysia ratified in 1995, committed the country to remove gender-based discrimination and align national laws and institutions accordingly. Complementing these, the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on Gender Equality called for women's full and effective participation and equal leadership at all levels. Together, these frameworks make gender equality in parliaments both a legal obligation and a test of democratic maturity.

In Malaysia, Article 8 of the Federal Constitution prohibits gender discrimination and underpins Malaysia's equality agenda. Since 2004, national policies have endorsed the target of 30% women in decision-making positions, reaffirmed in successive plans and political manifestos, including the pledge to ensure 30% women policymakers by Pakatan Harapan (PH). Nonetheless, progress remains slow. Non-binding targets, limited enforcement, uneven party commitment, and weak monitoring have left women holding only 13.5% of seats in the Dewan Rakyat, well below the stated goal.

Closing this gap is essential to strengthening representation and public confidence in Malaysia's democracy. This study aimed to explore the current state of women's political participation and leadership (WPPL) in Malaysia after the 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022, the barriers that continue to persist, and the mechanisms and policies that could help address them. The study also aimed to generate evidence-based insights to inform institutional reforms, support more inclusive political practices, and advance Malaysia's long-standing commitment to gender-balanced governance.

## Research Questions

The study focused on three key research questions that guided the analysis of WPPL in Malaysia post-GE15. The aim was to examine the barriers that persist, the institutional mechanisms addressing them, and the policy pathways that could advance a more inclusive and gender-responsive political landscape.

**RQ 1.** What is the current state of women’s political participation and leadership in Malaysia after GE15, and what barriers continue to hinder their advancement?

**RQ 2.** What mechanisms and practices within political parties exist to address these barriers and promote women’s political participation?

**RQ 3.** What strategies and suggestions do the participants propose to strengthen women’s representation, and how do parties respond to them?

# The Malaysian Context

## Developments in Women’s Political Participation in Malaysia

Women’s political participation in Malaysia has a deep-rooted history that predates the country’s independence. In 1948, two women were appointed as representatives in the Federal Legislative Council, marking an early milestone in formal political involvement. During the 1955 general election, Malaya’s first nationwide electoral exercise saw only one woman winning one seat out of 52, reflecting the initial gender imbalance in political representation (see Table 1). Over the decades, women gradually gained ground, both through elected positions and appointed roles, despite structural and societal challenges. This slow but persistent progress culminated in 2018 with the historic appointment of Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as Malaysia’s first-ever woman Deputy Prime Minister. Long before reaching this milestone, Wan Azizah had been an outspoken advocate for inclusive democracy and gender equity. In her 2002 reflection, *Women in Politics: Reflections from Malaysia*, she critically examined the persistent under-representation of women and called for structural reforms to ensure not only numerical inclusion but also women’s meaningful influence in policymaking and democratic culture.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, women remain markedly under-represented across Malaysia’s political institutions. Following GE15, women hold 30 out of 222 seats (13.5%)<sup>2</sup> in Dewan Rakyat, a level that had largely plateaued. In the Senate (Dewan Negara), representation fluctuates with appointments. The most recent internal count noted 11 women among 56 filled seats<sup>3</sup>, while earlier official briefings recorded 9 women out of 70, underscoring the volatility of composition and the ongoing potential for corrective appointments. The same pattern extended to the executive, where women comprised about 16.1% of cabinet positions, signalling persistent gaps at the apex of decision-making.

These institutional outcomes align with Malaysia’s decline in comparative parity metrics. On the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index (2025), Malaysia ranks 128th out of 148 countries overall. This stands in contrast to the country’s far smaller gaps in education and health, indicating that Malaysia’s gender parity challenge is concentrated not in human capital development but in the political sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> International IDEA, 2002, *Women in Parliament*, Stockholm (<http://www.idea.int>). This is an English translation of Wan Azizah, “Perempuan dalam Politik: Refleksi dari Malaysia,” in International IDEA, 2002, *Perempuan di Parlemen: Bukan Sekedar Jumlah*, Stockholm: International IDEA, pp. 191–202.

<sup>2</sup> See Table 1

<sup>3</sup> See Table 2

Table 1: Gender-based composition of the Dewan Rakyat from 1959 to present

Parliament meetings	Terms of the Dewan Rakyat	Number of members	Gender-based composition of members	
			Men	Women
First	11.9.1959 – 1.3.1964	104	101 (97%)	3 (2.9%)
Second	18.5.1964 – 20.3.1969	104	101 (97%)	3 (2.9%)
Third	20.2.1971 – 31.7.1974	144	142 (98%)	2 (1.4%)
Fourth	4.11.1974 – 12.6.1978	154	149 (96%)	5 (3.3%)
Fifth	31.7.1978 – 29.3.1982	154	147 (95%)	7 (4.5%)
Sixth	14.6.1982 – 19.7.1986	154	146 (94%)	8 (5.2%)
Seventh	6.10.1986 – 5.10.1990	177	170 (96%)	7 (4.0%)
Eighth	3.12.1990 – 6.4.1995	180	169 (94%)	11 (6.0%)
Ninth	7.6.1995 – 11.11.1999	192	177 (92%)	15 (7.8%)
Tenth	20.12.1999 – 4.3.2004	193	173 (90%)	20 (10.0%)
Eleventh	17.5.2004 – 13.2.2008	219	196 (89%)	23 (10.5%)
Twelfth	28.4.2008 – 3.4.2013	222	199 (90%)	23 (10.4%)
Thirteenth	24.6.2013 – 7.4.2018	222	199 (90%)	23 (10.4%)
Fourteenth	16.7.2018 – 10.10.2022	222	189 (86%)	33 (14.9%)
Fifteenth	19.12.2022 to present	222	192 (87%)	30 (13.5%)

Sources: (Lin, 2002; Federal Constitution, 2020; Rosyidah et al. (2021); Sheikh (2022); Asri and Muhamad (2023); Azmi et al. (2024); Muhamad et al. (2024); and Parliament of Malaysia (2025)

Table 2: Gender-based composition of the Dewan Negara from 1959 to present

Parliament meetings	Terms of the Dewan Negara	Number of members <sup>4</sup>	Gender-based composition of members	
			Men	Women
First <sup>5</sup>	11.09.1959 – 01.03.1964	50	45 (98%)	1 (2%)
Second <sup>6</sup>	18.05.1964 – 20.03.1969	58	56 (97%)	2 (3%)
Third <sup>7</sup>	20.02.1971 – 31.07.1974	58	56 (97%)	2 (3%)
Fourth <sup>8</sup>	04.11.1974 – 12.06.1978	58	50 (88%)	7 (12%)
Fifth <sup>9</sup>	31.07.1978 – 29.03.1982	68	62 (91%)	6 (9%)
Sixth <sup>10</sup>	14.06.1982 – 19.07.1986	69	51 (88%)	7 (12%)
Seventh <sup>11</sup>	06.10.1986 – 05.10.1990	69	47 (82%)	10 (18%)
Eighth <sup>12</sup>	03.12.1990 – 06.04.1995	69	48 (79%)	13 (21%)
Ninth <sup>13</sup>	07.06.1995 – 11.11.1999	69	47 (71%)	19 (29%)
Tenth <sup>14</sup>	20.12.1999 – 04.03.2004	70	46 (70%)	20 (30%)
Eleventh <sup>15</sup>	17.05.2004 – 13.02.2008	70	48 (74%)	17 (26%)
Twelfth <sup>16</sup>	28.04.2008 – 03.04.2013	70	44 (75%)	15 (25%)
Thirteenth <sup>17</sup>	24.06.2013 – 07.04.2018	70	54 (83%)	11 (17%)
Fourteenth <sup>18</sup>	16.07.2018 – 10.10.2022	70	50 (82%)	11 (18%)
Fifteenth <sup>19</sup>	19.12.2022 to present	70	45 <sup>20</sup> (80%)	11 <sup>21</sup> (20%)

<sup>4</sup> Fong, R. M. (2022). Reforming the Dewan Negara: Its Evolution and Options for Reform. *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament*, 2.

<https://doi.org/10.54313/journalmp.v2i.55>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-13011964.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-26021969.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-30071974.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-28041978.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-26031982.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-10121985.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-29061990.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-20121994.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-03081999.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-20112003.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-24122007.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-20122012.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-05042018.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DN-16082022.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/statistik-dn.html?uweb=dn&>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/ahli-dewan-dn.html?uweb=dn&>

<sup>21</sup> <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/MY/MY-UC01/>

## Persistent Gaps and Structural Barriers for WPPL

Women’s political participation in Malaysia remains constrained by enduring structural and institutional barriers, despite decades of incremental progress. During GE15, Malaysia recorded 21.17 million registered voters, of whom 50.17% were women<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, out of the 945 total parliamentary candidates, only 127 (13.4%) were women, and a mere 32 succeeded in winning seats. Historical analysis showed that earlier electoral cycles (1982–1999) appeared more favourable to women’s representation primarily because a small number of women were strategically placed in “safe seats”, rather than due to systemic inclusivity<sup>23</sup>.

Existing research and comparative literature consistently highlight that Malaysia’s experience reflects a broader global pattern of persistent gendered barriers to political leadership. These barriers are multidimensional, ranging from structural and institutional obstacles (such as the absence of legislated gender quotas and party gatekeeping) to socioeconomic and cultural constraints<sup>24</sup> that limit women’s access to resources, time, and legitimacy within political spaces. Although women have demonstrated readiness and competence to lead, the playing field remains uneven, sustained by political financing norms<sup>25</sup>, limited internal party reforms, and societal expectations around gender roles. Addressing these persistent barriers requires policy adjustments and also transformative structural reforms that make Malaysia’s political institutions genuinely gender-responsive and inclusive.

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<sup>22</sup> Election Commission of Malaysia <https://spr.gov.my/infografik-pilihan-raja/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/align-malaysiacountry-report-may24-final-v2.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/jn\\_xxxx\\_asean\\_report\\_a4\\_aw\\_single.pdf](https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/jn_xxxx_asean_report_a4_aw_single.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/wfd\\_malaysia-costs\\_of\\_politics\\_and\\_women\\_representation.pdf](https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/wfd_malaysia-costs_of_politics_and_women_representation.pdf)

# Methodology

## Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of the Members of Parliament (MPs) in Malaysia regarding WPPL. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in capturing in-depth and personalised narratives, which allowed participants to reflect on their political journeys, the barriers they encountered, and the processes through which they established their political presence and electoral success. The study also adopted an interpretivist approach, premised on the assumption that social reality is constructed through individual meanings and interactions. This approach was particularly suitable for examining how MPs navigated gendered structures within Malaysia's political landscape, including institutional norms, party culture, and societal expectations. By privileging participants' interpretations of their experiences, the research sought to provide nuanced insights into the interplay between gender, power, and political representation.

## Sampling and Participants

A total of 10 MPs participated in this study, comprising 6 women and 4 men selected through purposive sampling. This non-probability technique was adopted to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant expertise and lived experiences aligned with the research objectives.

The female MPs represented a spectrum of political parties, regions, and parliamentary roles spanning both government and opposition coalitions. Variation in career trajectories was intentionally incorporated, encompassing both first-term and experienced legislators. The male MPs, in contrast, were selected based on their leadership positions within party structures, enabling them to offer institutional perspectives on party culture, support mechanisms, and the extent of organisational commitment to gender-inclusive reforms.

Collectively, the participants represented seven major Malaysian political parties, capturing the heterogeneity of Malaysia's parliamentary landscape. The seven parties were Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Parti Bangsa Malaysia (PBM), Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS), and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU). This sampling strategy enhanced representational breadth and analytical depth, which allowed a nuanced understanding of the intersecting factors shaping political participation and leadership across gender lines. The invitation to participate in this study was issued to a large pool of MPs whose criteria likely matched to enrich the dataset. Nonetheless, several declined and deferred owing to tight and overlapping schedules, competing duties, and the study's time constraint. Table 3 provides the details of the participants.

Table 3: The participants' characteristics

Coalition	Political party	Gender	State of constituency	Role
Government	PKR	Female	Selangor	Experienced MP
		Male		Party Communication Director
	DAP	Female	Johor	Experienced MP
		Male	Selangor	Party Vice President
	AMANAH	Male	Senator	Party Youth Wing Chief
	GPS	Female (1)	Sarawak	Experienced MP
		Female (2)		Newly elected MP
		Male		Party Chairman
Opposition	BERSATU	Female	Melaka	Experienced MP
	PAS	Female	Kelantan	Experienced MP

## Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using a cross-thematic analysis approach that combined both deductive and inductive coding strategies. The deductive component was guided by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's (WFD) WPPL framework, while the inductive component allowed new themes to emerge organically from the data.

For the first research question, which examined barriers to WPPL, the WFD's WPPL framework served as an analytical lens, organised around four interrelated dimensions:

- **Gendered structural inequality** – scrutinising aspects, such as economic, education, reproductive labour, and caring responsibilities that limit women's ability to enter politics;
- **Institutional exclusion** – identifying barriers within political parties, parliamentary structures, and electoral systems that limit women's representation;
- **Masculine defaults** – analysing how political norms, practices, and behaviours are shaped by male experiences and expectations, often disadvantaging women; and
- **Political capital** – exploring how networks, legitimacy, and access to political resources are distributed unequally between men and women.

Each interview transcript was initially coded deductively against these four dimensions to capture structural and institutional barriers. Subsequently, an inductive thematic process was applied to the remaining research questions to identify emergent themes on enabling factors, pathways to leadership, and male allyship. This approach ensured that the analysis was both theoretically

informed and empirically grounded, reflecting participants' authentic experiences while maintaining alignment with the WPPL framework.

The coding process was iterative and comparative, involving continuous refinement of themes to ensure coherence and depth. To enhance analytical rigour, two researchers independently coded the data, followed by peer review sessions to reconcile discrepancies and establish inter-coder reliability. This collaborative process strengthened the transparency, validity, and credibility of the analytical outcomes.

## Ethical Consideration

Although this study was not subject to formal institutional ethics review, it was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical research standards. The research adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy. All the participants were clearly briefed on the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to decline or withdraw from participation at any point without consequence.

Prior to each interview, participants provided verbal consent for recording and participation. Identifying details were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity. All data were securely stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the research team and related WFD personnel. These measures were implemented to ensure that participants' rights, privacy, and dignity were upheld throughout the research process.

## Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations in its qualitative design. First, the relatively small sample size limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised beyond the participants involved. While the qualitative approach yielded rich, contextual insights, the results should be viewed as illustrative rather than representative of all the MPs in Malaysia.

Second, a larger proportion of participants were from government coalition parties. This may create a perception of political imbalance. Nevertheless, the research primarily aimed to understand intra-party experiences and mechanisms, rather than coalition-level differences.

Third, as the interviews were conducted within a specific post-election context, approximately three years after the general election, participants' reflections may have been shaped by ongoing political developments and their active parliamentary roles. Despite these constraints, the study offers valuable empirical insights into the structural and cultural dimensions of WPPL in Malaysia, contributing meaningfully to both academic and policy discourse.

# Key Findings

RQ 1: What is the current state of women’s political participation and leadership in Malaysia after GE15, and what barriers continue to hinder their advancement?

## Finding 1: Reassessing Barriers to WPPL in the Post-GE15 Context

### Gendered Structural Inequality

GE15 delivered mixed signals for women’s political representation. On the surface, more women were fielded as candidates across parties, and this fact was acknowledged by the participants, reflected by the gradual acceptance of gender diversity in nominations. In some cases, these improvements were the culmination of sustained exposure programmes and capacity-building efforts at the state level since 2008. Nonetheless, the proportion of female MPs has stagnated at around 14%–15%, well short of the 30% benchmark, indicating that the challenge lies less in nominations than in converting candidacy into electoral wins.

Since 2008, I’ve seen growing interest among women in politics. When PH were in power in several states, we ran many capacity-building programmes that helped women understand and engage with politics. For GE15, even more women stood as candidates than before, but the winning rate was still low. (PKR female MP)

While grassroots activism remained vibrant, it did not consistently translate into leadership at higher levels. At the community level, more women were taking up roles, such as village chiefs, and women youth leaders were gaining visibility, but progress was slow, and numbers remained low.

Similarly, in our party—DAP—I’ve seen many women, especially in my constituency, who are deeply committed to the party. They are actively involved and form the heart and soul of our grassroots efforts. However, many of them don’t rise to higher leadership levels. This is often due to a combination of factors, including less ambition compared to their male counterparts or the challenges they face that make them hesitant to take the next step. (DAP male MP)

### Institutional Exclusion

The proportion of elected women ministers remained modest. Nevertheless, the recent appointments of female MPs to lead the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Federal Territories, and the Ministry of Law and Institutional Reform signalled the Prime

Minister's confidence in women's leadership, regardless of gender<sup>26</sup>. Historically, none of these ministries had been led by a woman, despite their influence and importance in shaping national development and governance. These appointments, therefore, marked a symbolic yet substantive shift towards recognising women's capability to lead key portfolios that shape Malaysia's socio-political and institutional landscape.

## Masculine Defaults

Post-election surges in political interest, as seen in 2008, 2018, and to a lesser degree in 2022, have brought more women, particularly Malay, younger, and single women, into party activity. Nonetheless, the dominance of men in leadership remained unchallenged, and many committed grassroots women opted out of higher office due to perceived sacrifices or a lack of ambition.

I think interest in politics tends to spike after general elections, especially during historic moments like in 2008 and again in 2018. More recently, we also saw renewed interest following the 2022 elections, although I wouldn't say it was as clearly visible. Still, I believe it's fair to say that there has been growing interest, particularly among Malay women within my party. So, while the absolute numbers may be growing, the proportion of women involved, especially as compared to men, remains relatively modest. (DAP male MP)

## Political Capital

Catalytic events, such as *Reformasi*<sup>27</sup> and the push for ethnic representation<sup>28</sup> in Sarawak, further opened doors for women whose personal or community priorities aligned with political turning points. Nevertheless, these opportunities disproportionately benefited those already embedded within political or activist circles, revealing the uneven distribution of political capital. Those without strong party ties or mentors often remained on the margins despite comparable credentials or commitment. Support systems, particularly from spouses, families, and mentors, were repeatedly cited as decisive enablers of political careers, functioning as a form of social and relational capital that could be converted into political advantage.

My political career began during the *Reformasi* period (1998). I saw the condition Wan Azizah (YB Dato' Seri Dr Wan Azizah binti Dr Wan Ismail) had gone through and felt sorry for her. Out of the blue, she had to become a superwoman and take care of the family and everything else. We needed to support women like her. Between 2000 and 2003, I supported Fuziah Salleh (YB Senator Datuk Dr Fuziah binti Salleh) as her campaign manager when she was serving as the Member of Parliament for Kuantan. Then, in 2004, I became the first Central Women's

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with AMANAH Senator

<sup>27</sup> Interview with PKR female MP

<sup>28</sup> Interview with GPS female MP

Secretary for Parti Keadilan Rakyat (2004–2007). That was the real turning point in my political journey. (PKR female MP)

The true turning point in my career came when I was elected Deputy Speaker of the Dewan Negara—something far beyond what I had ever imagined. I was appointed as a senator in 2020, and just six months later, I was selected for the Deputy Speaker post for the Senate. (GPS female MP)

In 2006, the late Tok Guru Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, then Chief Minister of Kelantan, appointed me as a Senator, marking my formal entry into public office. I served two consecutive terms as State Assemblyman before being elected as the Member of Parliament in 2022. (PAS female MP)

This narrative clearly illustrates the accumulation and conversion of **political capital** over time. Early exposure through family legacy provided initial familiarity and access to political networks. Academic excellence and public visibility further strengthened these women's legitimacy and reputation, both forms of symbolic capital that translated into political credibility. Recognition by party leadership reflects the institutional trust and endorsement central to political capital. The trajectory from appointed to elected positions demonstrates how social prestige, professional standing, and elite support intersect to sustain women's advancement in Malaysian politics.

## Finding 2: The Rise of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP)

Currently, a particularly concerning trend is the rise in violence against women in politics (VAWP), especially in digital spaces. Women politicians in Malaysia, like their counterparts globally, increasingly face gendered online harassment targeting their appearance, marital status, and credibility, which creates hostile environments that deter WPPL aspirations.<sup>29</sup> This phenomenon could contribute to the withdrawal of women candidates, where women's engagement at the grassroots level fails to translate into proportional representation in decision-making positions.

### Varied Experiences and Perception of Political Violence

In Malaysia, VAWP ranges from everyday sexist taunts and reputational smears to coordinated online harassment and threats. Female MPs differed in how serious they judged the problem to be and where they drew the line on what counted as political violence. In the interviews, most women spoke cautiously. Some said they had not faced direct harassment, attributing this to deliberate public conduct, personal caution, and perceived respect from constituents.<sup>30</sup> Others described

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<sup>29</sup> Phillips, H., Bergia, A., & Algora, R. G. (2024). Strengthening Democracy by Reducing Threats to Women in Politics. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Strengthening-democracy-reducing-threats-women-politics.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Interview with GPS female MPs

severe incidents, such as psychological abuse, sexual harassment<sup>31</sup>, legal intimidation, and sustained online attacks.<sup>32</sup> Taken together, these accounts point to uneven exposure and differing thresholds for naming behaviour as political violence.

## Normalisation of Verbal Abuse

Certain participants argued that aggressive exchanges in Parliament or online were a gender-neutral hazard of political life, often linked to provocative statements or political style.<sup>33</sup> This perspective risks shifting responsibility back onto women politicians to self-censor rather than placing the responsibility on perpetrators or institutional mechanisms to address harassment. Such views stood in contrast to those who stressed that gendered abuse, particularly sexualised threats, required unequivocal condemnation regardless of context.<sup>34</sup>

## Institutional Gaps and Weak Enforcement Mechanisms

Malaysia's Standing Orders ban sexist remarks<sup>35</sup>, and Speakers have periodically cautioned MPs and flagged new etiquette guidelines<sup>36</sup>, but enforcement is uneven and largely case-by-case. Calls from MPs and civil society for clear sanctions and complaint pathways recur after each incident, underscoring the gap between rules on paper and practice.<sup>37</sup> In this context, interventions, sometimes including male colleagues pushing back on sexist conduct in the chamber, tend to be ad hoc and personality-dependent rather than embedded safeguards. International standards emphasise that parliaments need independent complaint mechanisms, codes of conduct with sanctions, survivor-centred procedures, and mandatory training.<sup>38</sup> In the absence of these, outcomes hinge on leadership discretion.

I think it's essential for politicians to uphold respectful conduct, especially when it comes to gender. From what I recall, there was one clear instance involving the Langkawi MP (man) who made a very sexist remark against the Seputeh MP (woman). The man MP did eventually apologise, and we have to take that apology as genuine. But the point is, even one such incident is one too many. In the past,

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with PKR female MP – referring to her experience back in 2009/2010 while serving the state assembly.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with the remaining female MPs

<sup>33</sup> Interview with PAS female MP

<sup>34</sup> Interview with DAP female MP and AMANAH Senator

<sup>35</sup> Asrawati Awalina Aslan, "Conduct in the House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat) Parliament Malaysia," *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament* 2 (2022): 63–95.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/01/16/speaker-warns-sexist-remarks-bad-behaviour-in-parliament-will-not-be-tolerated/50458>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/10/30/take-stern-action-or-sexist-remarks-by-mps-will-never-end-says-young-syefura>

<sup>38</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments: Tool 2 of "Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region: Toolkit"* (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2022), PDF, ISBN 978-83-66690-82-0, [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/5/532187\\_1.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/5/532187_1.pdf)

sexist remarks were made repeatedly without much accountability. Now, at least, we're seeing some progress—people are being held responsible. (DAP male MP)

As Members of Parliament, we often remind ourselves that the Dewan is a *yang mulia*—an honourable chamber. Therefore, our language must remain parliamentary. If you cross the line with your words, how can you claim to be a legislator when you yourself do not respect the rules? Respect is essential. At times, what we hear can be painful, but as leaders, we must maintain self-control. No matter which side of the divide we come from, our words should set the standard. We have to be role models; if we behave “like we're in a zoo”, how can the rakyat respect us? Respect the people, and they will respect us. (GPS female 2 MP)

## Online Harassment as a Gendered Extension of Political Violence

The online environment emerged as a critical site of abuse.<sup>39</sup> A report from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) showed that 60% of women reported having experienced this online harassment. The female MPs shared that online platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, were disproportionately hostile towards women politicians, particularly those from minority ethnic or religious backgrounds.<sup>40</sup>

Online feedback can get blatantly sexist—people target me simply because I'm a woman, a mother, or for the “likes”. Platforms like Facebook have become especially toxic. People either idolise or loathe politicians, and the comment threads are full of hostility. (DAP female MP)

The male MPs, nonetheless, remarked that political hostility, particularly online, affected both men and women, but women faced qualitatively different attacks, often gendered in nature.<sup>41</sup> Their acknowledgement that harassment, defamation, and smear campaigns are common in Malaysia's political culture could be framed as part of the broader environment that enables gender-based political violence. This allows the narrative to point out that male allies have a role not only in advocating for women's participation but also in actively speaking out against gendered abuse when it occurs. At the same time, some male participants framed the problem as part of a broader societal deficit in equality norms, advocating long-term cultural change through early education to dismantle discriminatory attitudes.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2025-03/60-women-mps-asia-pacific-report-online-gender-based-violence>

<sup>40</sup> Interview with DAP female MP

<sup>41</sup> Interviews with male participants

<sup>42</sup> Interview with PBM male MP

One of the biggest challenges we as politicians face is the level of public scrutiny. When we talk about this kind of scrutiny, it means we're constantly under the microscope—everything we do or say is heavily criticised. And for women, that scrutiny is often even harsher.

I've personally experienced this. For example, I've talked before about the issue of wearing the tudung (headscarf), and now I see how my colleague, the Bukit Bendera MP (woman), is also facing it. Take the Bentong MP (woman). What she's gone through is far worse than what I've faced.

As a Malay man and a Member of Parliament, I sometimes receive harsh comments—people calling me murtad (apostate), for instance. But when you look at the kind of attacks the Bentong MP gets, especially on social media, they're even more violent and degrading. And I believe it's simply because she's a woman. Both of us are elected representatives and party leaders, yet the level of abuse she receives is disproportionately worse. The only real difference between us is gender—and that alone explains the added layer of hostility she faces.

(DAP male MP)

Several participants described relying on personal psychological resilience as a coping strategy for the VAWP incidents they encountered. International guidance cautions that individual coping cannot substitute legitimate institutional safeguards. Parliaments and parties should provide clear complaint pathways, survivor-centred procedures, and proportionate sanctions, alongside training for members and staff.<sup>43</sup> Without these structures, resilience risks becoming a stand-in for accountability, and abusive behaviour can persist, thus perpetuating the status quo. The participants called for collective female solidarity in Parliament to confront sexism, supported by male allies willing to speak out despite potential backlash.

Overall, the evidence indicated that VAWP in Malaysia remained under-recognised and insufficiently addressed institutionally. Although there is rhetorical support for respectful conduct, entrenched norms, uneven enforcement, and reliance on individual resilience constrain meaningful change. Progress requires a shift from ad hoc reactions to formal, consistently applied mechanisms across parties and during parliamentary sittings. Together, these measures are needed to ensure that women in politics can participate fully and safely, free from gendered violence and intimidation.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf>

## RQ 2: What mechanisms and practices within political parties exist to address these barriers and promote women’s political participation?

### Finding 1: The Internal Party Dynamics and Policies to Recruit and Promote Women Political Leaders

The interviews revealed that across Malaysia’s political parties, formal commitments to women’s political participation were increasingly common. Nonetheless, the degree to which these commitments translated into equitable representation varied considerably. Women’s wings often acted as the visible front for leadership grooming, running structured programmes to develop political skills, build confidence, and foster party loyalty.<sup>44</sup> In some cases, these were complemented by broader inclusivity measures, such as ensuring gender balance in staffing or placing women in visible decision-making roles. All the male MPs in this study acknowledged that symbolic representation through such initiatives, but cautioned that the ultimate benchmark was the number of women fielded and elected to Parliament, rather than appointed to internal positions alone.<sup>45</sup>

### Finding 2: Candidate Selection and Seat Allocation as Mechanisms for Promoting Women’s Political Leadership

The candidate selection processes involve formal rules with informal judgements. Loyalty, a track record under pressure, and alignment with leadership priorities are decisive in nominations. All the female MP participants stressed that women must demonstrate competence and visibility across multiple domains to be taken seriously. Similar requirements applied to men in high-stakes constituencies. Nonetheless, opportunities were unevenly distributed. Men were more often allocated safer seats early in their careers, allowing them to consolidate influence, whereas women were frequently tested in marginal or difficult constituencies.

Most importantly, our party doesn’t have a formal policy of placing women only in certain types of constituencies. Sometimes, first-time candidates—regardless of gender—are fielded in so-called “difficult” or “non-winnable” seats. But there are also cases where newcomers are placed in safer or more winnable constituencies with a higher majority. That said, this approach tends to favour men more often than women. Typically, men are given these safer seats early in their careers and

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with PKR and BERSATU female MPs

<sup>45</sup> Interview with PKR and DAP male MPs

later move on to advisory or leadership roles. I could give you many examples, but this pattern of progression—starting from a favourable seat and moving upward—seems more common for men candidates than for women. (DAP male MP)

A DAP female MP recalled contesting a seat previously held by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, part of the then-government) with a 20,000-vote majority, then being sent to a constituency in Johor state that her party had never won until that cycle.<sup>46</sup> In another case, Bentong, a constituency in Pahang state, became a difficult marginal once the MCA fielded a former party president in GE15. This shows how opponent strength and late strategic moves can alter seat risk after nominations. By contrast, when women were placed in winnable seats, they not only retained but strengthened them. Segambut, another constituency, was treated as a safe seat when a DAP female MP was promoted from state to federal level, and the Seputeh constituency shifted from an MCA stronghold to the safest seat under a long-serving DAP female MP, without reallocation to a male successor.<sup>47</sup> The binding constraint on outcomes is therefore seat quality, not simply the number of women fielded.

That shows DAP is willing to give women real opportunities and let them keep those seats. Admittedly, our strategy of sending women to difficult constituencies can sometimes backfire, but the principle remains important: women deserve fair chances, not merely to fulfil a quota. (DAP female MP)

Nevertheless, interview evidence from the DAP male MP showed “winnable” as a spectrum. In the last election (GE15), a senior MP moved from the Ipoh Timur constituency to contest in the Taiping constituency, both in the state of Perak, while a new male candidate took over Ipoh Timur. Both constituencies were classed as winnable, but Taiping was higher-risk due to its status as an opposition target, demanding a more intensive campaign. Similarly, Teluk Intan (a constituency in Perak state) was viewed as structurally marginal because of its voter demographics. This pattern suggests a deliberate party strategy for safer winnable seats is used to consolidate representation, while higher-risk winnable seats are assigned to more experienced or higher-profile figures. Rationally, this is the reason conversion rates depend not only on how many women are nominated but also on where they are placed along the risk spectrum of “winnable” seats.

Other than grassroots grooming, PKR experimented with a “headhunt” track as part of its broader strategy to diversify and strengthen women’s representation. This initiative widened the pipeline by inviting high-calibre professional women to contest under the party banner. As the PKR male MP explained, the political bureau, a small leadership circle, periodically reviewed the need to enhance women’s participation and decided whether to source candidates internally or recruit externally, often targeting corporate leaders, non-governmental organisation (NGO) figures, and academics.

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with DAP female MP

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

The party identifies women who have shown interest from the beginning and remained committed to political work. Often, these women are evaluated based on multiple factors. For example, some have a history of working with the government and demonstrating their capabilities, even under last-minute pressures, which proves their achievements. Others are long-time party members who have consistently shown loyalty, and when loyalty is needed, these women are seen as having higher chances to be selected. There are also women who may have been outside formal politics but maintained an interest in public affairs, gradually building a path to contesting in elections. Ultimately, the decision considers a combination of factors—personal commitment, loyalty, and alignment with party goals—whether they are long-term, short-term, or medium-term objectives. (PKR male MP)

This approach has produced several visible examples. One example is Fadhlina Sidek, a lawyer currently serving as the PKR Women’s Chief and holding the portfolio of Minister of Education. She was recruited, and she contested and won the Nibong Tebal constituency in GE15. Another example is Dr Noraishah Mydin Abdul Aziz, an academician, scientist, and disability advocate. She was fielded in the Putrajaya constituency<sup>48</sup> to challenge the then Minister of Education, Radzi Jidin. These examples show the party coupling constitutional commitments with targeted recruitment to attract professionals with public credibility. Such candidates are often “fast-tracked” compared to those advancing through traditional grassroots routes. Senior leaders also tend to champion these recruits publicly to signal alignment with party priorities. Nonetheless, sustaining legitimacy requires transparent selection criteria and structured mentoring so that external recruits complement, rather than overshadow, long-serving grassroots women leaders.

The behavioural drivers behind this approach probably appear to stem partly from a desire to project renewal and meritocratic openness and partly from practical recognition of the limited opportunities available to women advancing through traditional party structures. Unlike parties such as DAP, where candidate pools tend to develop organically through grassroots work, PKR’s strategy reflects a more proactive, though selective, attempt to accelerate women’s entry into national politics. This targeted recruitment serves as both a response to institutional bottlenecks and a symbolic gesture of commitment to gender inclusion within Malaysia’s evolving political landscape.

Across PAS and AMANAH parties, “merit-based” was framed as gender-neutral but anchored in winnability. The PAS female MP stressed courage, substance, and performance before highly educated grassroots, noting gender-blind training through the Election Academy and a practice of fielding women “as long as they are winnable”. The AMANAH male Senator defined merit as leadership quality, visibility, and likelihood of victory, cautioning against risking a seat for a woman. According to him, opportunities arise when women distinguish themselves in party work and public

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-election-used-to-challenges-disabled-candidate-noraishah-takes-on-putrajaya>

speaking, and by convention, AMANAH also elects at least one woman among the party’s vice-presidents. Read together, both perspectives validate performance-based advancement yet risk reproducing gatekeeping. Without transparent criteria, parity of campaign resources and access to winnable seat tiers, “merit” can default to incumbency protection and require women to clear a higher bar to be selected and retained.

### Finding 3: Female MPs Challenge the Safe-seat Narrative

A notable point of discrepancy from the mainstream political narrative emerged in this research. The idea that women should primarily contest in safe seats was strongly rejected by several female MPs.<sup>49</sup> These leaders argued that being fielded in constituencies where their party lacked a strong base forced them to work harder on the ground, thereby strengthening their legitimacy. Easy wins, they warned, could backfire by fuelling perceptions of tokenism and undermining credibility. Their preferred measure of merit was electoral performance in competitive contexts, not insulation from political risk. The male MPs offered a nuanced view here by agreeing that tough constituencies were increasingly used to test younger candidates, both men and women, but acknowledged that the long-term career support extended to men after such contests was not always matched for women.<sup>50</sup>

Still, numbers alone are not enough. I want to see women whose performance has substance, not candidates chosen merely to “fill a quota”. If we aim for 30%, but only 10%–20% are truly effective, what have we gained? Representation matters, but we must avoid the temptation to slot in any Tom, Dick, or Harry just to meet the target. Quality and meaningful participation should drive the quota, not the other way around. You need exposure—nothing in politics is ever given; you have to claim your space and excel. (GPS female MP)

### Finding 4: The Role of Male Allies in Promoting WPPL

#### Male Allies Amplify Women’s Voices

Male allyship within party selectorates functions as a “critical-actors” pathway to women’s advancement when formal rules are weak. When power is concentrated among male gatekeepers, supportive men can broker access to winnable seats, reallocate resources, and normalise women’s presence in decision-making forums. Nonetheless, allyship varies from symbolic (visibility without power transfer) to transactional (sponsorship into specific posts) to transformational (rule and

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with PKR, DAP, and GPS female MPs

<sup>50</sup> Interview with DAP male MP

culture change). Only transformational ally is durable because it reduces reliance on individual patrons and aligns parties with gender-sensitive representation standards.

### Male Allies Shape Gender Dynamics within Political Parties

In several interview accounts, the male MPs were not only willing to accommodate women in candidate lists or leadership positions but actively sought them out to ensure balanced representation at events and in party decision-making forums. The participants cited concrete cases of male allyship.

- **The Case of PKR**

Selangor state, under the leadership of the former chief minister, the late Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, prioritised women on merit. The PKR female MP recalled that during his tenure, women held around 40% of positions in the state office. Current allies, such as Wong Chen (Subang MP) and Rafizi Ramli (Pandan MP), continued this tradition. Rafizi, as a former party strategist, regularly insisted that at least one woman be a speaker on the election campaign stage and stated that “we also have women audiences”. These actions signalled not just rhetorical support but everyday practices that widened women’s access and visibility within the party.

Under the late Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, I felt strong support. Drawing on his corporate and political experience, he often said women were more effective and less prone to internal politicking. He prioritised women on merit, and to my recollection, Selangor reached about 40% women representatives during his tenure.

Today, YB Wong Chen and many male PKR MPs—especially among the backbenchers—are similarly supportive. When I worked with Rafizi Ramli, he was consistently alert to gaps: “Do we have another woman?” he would ask, and he insisted every *ceramah* (campaign) include at least one woman speaker because women were in the audience too. Leaders like Wong Chen also never leave out women’s issues in their speeches, and they are attentive to practical matters—asking, for example, whether a night meeting time is suitable. It is not only that they offer opportunities; they genuinely hold these views and are sensitive to women’s roles in the party.

(PKR female MP)

Such behaviour reflects both symbolic and substantive allyship. Symbolic in the sense of recognising women’s presence as important for party optics, but substantive when combined with consistent advocacy for women’s policy priorities. Importantly, some allies were seen as sensitive

to operational barriers, for example, scheduling meetings at times that would not disadvantage women's participation.<sup>51</sup>

- **Generational and Cultural Shifts within DAP**

Within DAP, male allyship appeared more embedded in party culture, partly due to its younger leadership profile, especially after the 2025 Central Executive Committee (CEC) election. The new line-up comprised at least 45% of members around the age of 45, compared with the previous 2022 CEC. This generational shift has coincided with an internal reframing of gender equality as a matter of "social justice" rather than a "women's issue". Leaders, such as Liew Chin Tong and Steven Sim, were cited as strong proponents of gender quotas, women's inclusion in decision-making spaces, and equal partnership in political work even across party lines.

In DAP, we are relatively fortunate; our leadership skews younger, and many of my male colleagues actively support the women-empowerment agenda. One male leader offers a good example. He has no hesitation in saying, at the next GE, we aim for 30% women candidates. That is exactly the right approach, because he believes gender equality is integral to social justice.

Leaders, such as Liew Chin Tong and Steven Sim, show that men can be strong advocates for gender equality. I am not claiming the older generation cannot accept the idea, but younger politicians often find it easier to see that equal representation is simply fair.

(DAP female MP)

- **Allyship Across Party Lines (GPS, BERSATU, and PAS)**

Participants from GPS, BERSATU, and PAS described women pathways to be an election candidate often depended on leadership endorsement, reflecting the central role of party presidents and senior figures in candidate selection. This support can unlock opportunities, particularly in competitive contexts, though outcomes may vary with leadership changes. The PAS participants also highlighted instances of collective leadership in crises (e.g., the 2014 Kelantan floods) and expressed a preference for gradual, consensus-orientated progress supported by male allies.<sup>52</sup> For BERSATU, male allies proved pivotal in turning support into an actual candidacy. For example, during the Kedah cycle, when a women's wing's slot unexpectedly fell off the slate, the women's wing pursued the matter. A senior male MP, Radzi Jidin (Putrajaya MP), escalated the matter to the party president, resulting in securing a replacement seat in Hulu Langat, lifting the

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with BERSATU female MP

<sup>52</sup> Interview with PAS female MP

women's slate from one to two candidates. The male ally's backing, framing, and access to leadership demonstrated how an effective ally used his political capital to open doors, broker solutions, and share the cost of asking by working with the women's wing to keep representation on track.

During the Kedah campaign, a woman's seat we expected was suddenly dropped. The Women's Wing's Chief took it up with the party president, and Radzi Jidin (their male ally) also intervened. With their backing, we secured a replacement seat in Hulu Langat (Selangor). Otherwise, with Kedah, we would have had only one woman candidate, but with Hulu Langat being given to us, we had two.  
(BERSATU female MP)

- **Male Allies as Bridge-builders for Structural Reform**

The male MPs acknowledged their potential as bridge-builders, framing allyship as a way to explain structural inequalities and soften resistance to quotas among sceptical members.<sup>53</sup> Several male MPs emphasised that authority should follow competence, not gender.<sup>54</sup> For example, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is currently chaired and vice-chaired by women. The outputs increased, with more enquiries completed and published reports compared with previous terms. Even though the committee is chaired by a woman, the decisions are respected, and performance is judged on delivery and commitment rather than on gender or credentials. This everyday normalisation, the DAP Male MP argued, erodes gendered perceptions of political authority over time. Earlier Malaysian studies noted that many male politicians avoided the “feminist” label, seeing it as politicised or “for women”.<sup>55</sup> This study's cross-party interviews suggested a partial shift where male participants endorsed feminist principles in practice, with several stressing that “one need not be a woman to be a feminist and an ally”. Crucially, their support extended beyond sentiment to a willingness to use positional authority to back women's advancement.

I believe this shows that women leaders are delivering results. Just look at the progress we've made in terms of participation and output. Personally, I don't view leadership through the lens of gender. It doesn't matter to me—what matters is their capability and commitment. So, in terms of leadership and performance, I'm fully supportive and have no reservations whatsoever about being led by women.  
(DAP male MP)

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with PKR male MP

<sup>54</sup> Interview with DAP male MP and AMANAH Senator

<sup>55</sup> Azmi et al., *Men as Allies in Shaping a Gender Equitable Society*, 2024.

- **Moving from Individual Support to Institutional Norms**

The support shown by individual male MPs varied along a spectrum. This support came from active champions who intervened in scheduling, resource allocation, and rule changes, to pragmatic supporters who amplified colleagues and co-sponsored initiatives to quiet doubters. Effective allyship requires moving beyond symbolic gestures to address structural barriers. Where doubts about women’s “readiness” persist, the solution lies in transparent criteria and targeted capacity-building, not a retreat into tokenism. When these practices are institutionalised, women’s leadership becomes the norm rather than the exception, embedding gender inclusivity as a standard feature of party culture across Malaysia’s political landscape.

## RQ 3: What strategies and suggestions do the participants propose to strengthen women’s representation, and how do parties respond to them?

### Finding 1: From Targets to Institutionalisation

While most parties adopted numerical targets for women’s representation, measures often remained symbolic without binding rules or enforcement mechanisms. Party constitutions helped (e.g., DAP’s 30% CEC rule and PKR’s leadership quota), but without placement mandates and sanctions, these targets were largely symbolic. As of 2025, women hold 30 out of 222 seats in the Dewan Rakyat (≈13.5%), underscoring the delivery gap. Currently, reaching 30% would be necessary but not sufficient. Policy changes depend on critical actors in positions of leverage and on seat/committee placements that confer staying power and agenda control.<sup>56</sup> The participants also mentioned that, given male-dominated caucuses, reforms stalled without a clear top-down party directive; presidents, whips, and selection boards must adopt and enforce the 30% rule. Therefore, the next step is not another pledge but to establish binding placement rules and oversight so qualified women are fielded in winnable constituencies and appointed to posts that confer agenda control. In short, the missing link is institutionalisation.

First, you need party backing. Without a clear top-down directive, a 30% rule will not stick. Most MPs are men; unless the party president and whips instruct it, it won’t pass. (DAP female MP)

If there’s real commitment from the top leadership—if the Prime Minister announces that 30% of candidates must be women, across all parties—then the parties will follow. In my view, as long as Parliament can pass a law requiring the Election Commission (EC) to enforce a quota for women, that’s enough. If the Prime Minister wants it and the government wants it, just say so, and all the parties will comply. There’s no need for us to protest or march. (PAS female MP)

Parties, such as BERSATU and AMANAH, acknowledged the 30% target but hesitated to constitutionalise it due to concerns over the availability of winnable female candidates. Moving from the current levels to the full quota would require a substantial increase in qualified candidates, an outcome some leaders believe is not yet achievable in competitive constituencies.<sup>57</sup> PAS rejected the fixed quota in favour of a “merit-based” approach. Nevertheless, the decision to field women in

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<sup>56</sup> Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, “Substantive Representation of Women in Malaysian Legislatures: Parliament (Dewan Rakyat) and State Assemblies,” in *Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments*, ed. Devin K. Joshi and Christian Echle (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 138, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003275961>

<sup>57</sup> Interview with AMANAH Senator

elections would come from the endorsement of its religious council, Muktamar, a process dependent on top leadership discretion rather than institutional safeguards.<sup>58</sup>

No party would object. Even in PAS, the president has said we're not bound by the 30% figure. If we have more than 40% winnable women candidates, the party will accept them—that's the commitment. In other words, if you're a winnable candidate, the party doesn't look at your gender, and neither do the voters. (PAS female MP)

## Finding 2: Sequencing and Strategic Seat Allocation for Women Candidates

The interview data also revealed that incremental approaches to candidate placement would help manage party resistance while gradually strengthening women's representation. A practical way to navigate party dynamics was mentioned by a DAP MP from Johor. She cautioned that sudden reallocation of safe seats could trigger pushback from incumbent male MPs. Instead, parties can add women candidates gradually as vacancies arise through retirements or boundary changes and, crucially, place them in constituencies they can win. This staged pathway builds depth in increasing women's position to deputy or "number two" roles, then promotes proven state assembly members to Parliament.

In DAP, we're currently at around 5%, so the adjustment feels manageable. For instance, if we contest 40 parliamentary seats, we would only need to add 2 more women. This kind of gradual adjustment is practical, as each election naturally creates openings when certain MPs retire. Through such incremental changes, male MPs are less likely to feel that their positions are being threatened.

What I'm suggesting is that we shouldn't be overly ambitious at once. If a party currently has only 10% women and suddenly wants to increase that to 30%—say, from three to nine women candidates—that requires reallocating six seats. Understandably, some male incumbents who wish to recontest may feel uneasy about this. Therefore, a phased and realistic approach is more sustainable and less likely to provoke resistance.

(DAP female MP)

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<sup>58</sup> Azmi, Z. (2020). Discoursing Women's Political Participation Towards Achieving Sustainable Development: The Case of Women in Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, 38. [http://web.usm.my/km/38\(Supp.1\)2020/km38s12020\\_5.pdf](http://web.usm.my/km/38(Supp.1)2020/km38s12020_5.pdf)

Nonetheless, in Malaysia, elite turnover rarely comes from voluntary retirement. Ahead of GE15, only a small subset of incumbents publicly announced that they would not recontest, while most recontested, switched seats, or were deselected by their parties.<sup>59</sup> Hence, a staged strategy alone will not open enough seats; sequencing matters. Strengthening women's presence in central decision-making bodies is considered a prerequisite to securing competitive seats. Without this institutional foothold, quotas risk being reduced to tokenistic measures, with women fielded primarily in marginal or losing constituencies.

### **Finding 3: Building Merit and Expanding the Recruitment Pipeline**

Creating a sustainable pool of qualified women candidates requires deliberate investment, not reliance on rhetoric or existing structures. If parties insist on “merit-based”, they must invest in creating the candidate pool through targeted outreach to young, working women and clear pathways from local roles to winnable constituencies. Some male leaders stressed that achieving sustainable buy-in required widening the recruitment base. Engaging young, working women, particularly Malay women with families, was identified as key to building a robust pipeline of candidates. This demands targeted outreach beyond traditional methods, using platforms suited to specific demographics, and embedding gender inclusion into long-term party renewal strategies rather than relying solely on electoral promises.

I believe there are now many qualified women leaders. If you look at academic achievements, more women are graduating compared to men. On paper, women are actually performing better than men in many areas, including law. Sometimes, men are given consideration long before a qualified woman is even recognised.  
(PBM male MP)

The big challenge now for political parties is figuring out how to effectively reach and engage this segment of society, young women, and encourage their political participation. To get more people interested and to join political parties, especially women, we need to start by understanding who they are and how to reach them. For example, Malay women with families form a large and influential segment. Many of them are working and have purchasing power. So, how do we engage them effectively? (DAP male MP)

Overall, while rhetorical buy-in is widespread, substantive buy-in remains uneven. DAP suggests that structural change is achievable when targets are paired with enforceable mechanisms and phased integration. Other parties remain cautious, citing readiness and resourcing constraints. Unless parties formalise placement mandates, ring-fence resources, and enforce compliance, the 30% target will stay aspirational rather than operational.

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-ageing-leaders-politics-global-trend-anwar-mahathir-biden-trump-4981531>

# Recommendations

## Macro Level – National and Legislative Framework

- Enact legislation mandating a minimum of 30% women candidates with enforceable penalties, and adapt new electoral systems to promote women, such as the Top-Up Women-Only Additional Seats (TWOAS) and/or Women-Only Additional Seats
- Appoint more women to the Dewan Negara and non-elective posts strategically
- Establish a political party fund for women’s empowerment that acknowledges political parties that have implemented the 30% quota, with matching grants to support substantive leadership development and expand the pool of qualified women leaders
- Strengthen the women’s parliamentary caucus to advance gender equality and women’s leadership agenda
- Mandate the collection and publication of gender-disaggregated statistics on political participation, parliamentary roles, and leadership appointments
- Engage with and advocate for the adoption of IPU-endorsed good practices to advance a gender-sensitive parliament toolkit
- Advocate for the public and voters through education campaigns nationwide

## Meso Level – Political Party and Institutional Structure

- Embed gender quotas in party constitutions and operationalise the quotas through transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms that ensure consistent implementation from the grassroots to the national level
- Ensure that women are placed in competitive and winnable constituencies, as well as in influential leadership roles
- Minimise woman-versus-woman contexts to optimise candidate placement and deploy strong women contenders in winnable seats held by male incumbents
- Allocate and invest party resources to identify, mentor, and train emerging women leaders at all levels

## Micro Level – Individual Capacity and Cultural Change

- Be visible, volunteer at the constituency office to learn the grassroots works
- Promote self-directed learning and participation in civic and political education programmes to foster early awareness and engagement among young women
- Encourage cross-gender mentorship and allyship networks to expand women's access to political knowledge, opportunity, and visibility
- Equip aspiring women leaders with digital literacy and online safety training to navigate the risks and opportunities of political communication

# Conclusion

The WPPL in Malaysia has advanced steadily, and evidence suggests that women are ready to lead. Across parties and levels of governance, women have demonstrated competence, credibility, and commitment to public service. Currently, not capability, but opportunity—the structural and institutional conditions that allow women to contest and win—is lacking. Women constituted approximately 50.17% of voters in GE15. Nevertheless, only 30 (13.5%) out of 222 seats in the Dewan Rakyat are held by women. This imbalance underscores a systemic gap between women’s electoral strength and their political presence. If women are provided with an equal playing field through fair nomination processes, equitable seat allocations, and access to campaign resources, the existing barriers could be dismantled. The challenge, therefore, lies not in women’s readiness but in ensuring that the political system opens the same pathways to leadership that men have long enjoyed.

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