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Give our women more space in political arena

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YOUR editorial "Hand that rocks the world" is enlightening and is certainly most welcome to women groups (NST, Dec 30).

The appointment of Datuk Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz as Bank Negara Governor and Datuk Ainum Mohamed Saaid as Attorney-General augurs well for our women.

Of greater significance is the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's stance that it is not a question of gender, but performance and qualification that count in the appointment of women to high positions.

This is indeed very encouraging and commendable.

Although Malaysian women, in addition to their traditional role as mothers, do play an important role in the decision-making process, such participation, however, does not commensurate with the increasing number of educated women who are capable and ready for challenging positions, both in the public and private sectors.

It is regrettable that gender discrimination and the archaic perception that "a woman's place is in the kitchen" still persist.

In calling for a new look at women's role in society during the recent Budget session of Parliament, Sukinam Domo, the Barisan Nasional Member of Parliament for Batang Sadong, said educated men's egos remain an obstacle to women's advancement.

Women form 48 per cent of the population and 58 per cent of the undergraduates are women.

Malaysian women are more intelligent, talented, have better academic qualifications and have had greater exposure than their sisters of yesteryear.

Women are by nature endowed with the qualities of patience, forbearance and tolerance and are less susceptible to corruption. Motherhood had made them more down-to-earth. They have made valuable contribution for the progress and well-being of the nation.

More women should, therefore, be considered for greater participation in the decision-making process, particularly in the legislature.

Though under-representation of women in important positions of power is a world-wide phenomenon, genuine efforts must be made to redress the imbalance to give our women more political space.

Incidents of crime, drug abuse, rape, domestic violence, divorces, single mothers, sexual promiscuity, unwed mothers, abandoned children, runaways, teenage problems and general moral decadence have pervaded our society at all levels. Women legislators are more apt and competent in addressing these problems.

The success of Germany and the Scandinavian countries in dramatically enhancing women's representation through party-based quotas has prompted women groups in India to push for greater empowerment through the Women's Reservation Bill by demanding that 33 per cent of places be reserved for women in the legislature.

They also demand that any party that does not adhere to the quota system or dumps a woman candidate in a losing constituency should be deregistered.

Although the 30 women MPs in the 330-member Bangladesh Parliament are elected by law-makers, women groups are clamouring for political reform whereby in the yet-to-be approved 450-seat enlarged Parliament, 150 seats should be reserved for women to be directly elected by the people.

Kuwait's women activists are trying to overturn an election law which

bans women from voting and standing for public office. Although its Constitutional Court turned down their plea last July, the activists are pursuing the issue vehemently.

It is ironic that not even one woman was elected to the 32-member Umno supreme council by the general assembly. The lone woman member in the council owes her position to being the head of Wanita Umno.

In the Dewan Rakyat, we have only 10 per cent women MPs, including the Opposition. Our women are lagging far behind their counterparts in many countries like Sweden (40 per cent), Finland (34 per cent), Denmark (34 per cent) and Germany (26 per cent), to name a few.

Women's achievements in other countries are a source of inspiration and have spurred our women to take more interest in the democratic process.

Notable among them are the late Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, the world's first elected woman Prime Minister, the late Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy, Sheikh Hasina Wajeed, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and her predecessor Begum Khalida Zia and the late ex-Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir.

The others include former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was given the sobriquet "the Iron Lady" by the Soviet army newspaper; Helen Clark, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, and the West End dancer-turned-politician Betty Boothroyd, the first woman to be elected as Speaker of Britain's House of Commons in the 600-year history of the mother of Parliaments.

Addressed as Madam Speaker and described as "the spitfire of parliamentary discipline", she held the coveted post for more than eight years. These women have truly given expression to the adage "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world".

If our men do not harbour male chauvinist prejudice, who knows, one day we may have a Madam Speaker or even a woman as Prime Minister.