

**M'sia: Too few women in leadership positions**  
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COMMENT It is a paradox, all right. Women make up more than half of those who take part in protests and other activities organised by her political party on issues affecting low-income workers, says Rani Rasiah of the Socialist Party of Malaysia.

But when it comes to holding official positions at the party's local branches, more than half of the officials happen to be men, she observes.

"Maybe the womenfolk feel they have responsibilities at home and are unable to attend regular party meetings and the demands that come with them," reasons the party's deputy secretary general.

zeti akhtar aziz bank negara "There is also a certain degree of control at home about women going out at night or leaving the household to attend regular meetings," she continues. "Maybe the women themselves lack self esteem and self-confidence to play a leadership role."

But this gap points to similar trends in other aspects of women's role in decision-making in Malaysia, although some women have made significant inroads into key posts in politics or business that were once dominated by men.

For instance, the Governor of Malaysia's central bank, Bank Negara, Zeti Akhtar Aziz (left), and the head of the Securities Commission, Zarinah Anwar, are both high-profile women.

But a look at overall indicators of leadership positions shows that women make up only 14 percent of decision makers in the public and private sectors on average, researcher Cecelia Ng says in a report to the United Nations Country Team for Malaysia.

#### Political arena

In the political arena, of the elected representatives in the Senate, Parliament and state assemblies, women make up just 28.8 percent, 10.4 percent and 8 percent, respectively, Ng adds, citing 2008 data from the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry. These figures are below the 30 percent allocation for women in decision-making levels in the public sector that the Malaysian government set in 2004.

penang state government allocation for chinese school 050109 chong eng At the workplace, less than half, or 45 percent, or Malaysia's total workforce are women. Moreover, they often work for less pay than men for the same work, says opposition parliamentarian Chong Eng (right).

In short, activists argue more than just having some women at high-profile positions in government, private or other sectors, their involvement in key decision-making level is needed if gender equality is to grow deeper roots.

As it is, while governments talk of good governance, very often the aspect of gender equality as a key element is left out of the picture, says Prema Devaraj, secretary of Good Governance and Gender Equality Society (3Gs) in north-west Penang state.

Yet governance applies not only to how governments rule and implement decisions but how

its institutions make these decisions, she explains. Better governance includes more representative ways of making decisions, which includes involving women in them.

"When we talk about gender equality, we are talking about substantive equality," she says. This means equality of access, opportunities and benefits for both women and men.

#### Progress made

On the surface, Muslim-majority Malaysia has made a lot of progress on gender-related policies. It has signed up to many of the international commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Its National Policy on Women goes back to 1989. The South-east Asian country has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, albeit with several reservations.

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In 2001, Malaysia amended its federal constitution to prohibit any form of gender discrimination.

Such measures appear to have made a difference. The Malaysian Gender Gap Index, jointly developed by the United Nations Development Programme and the Malaysian government, revealed that the gender gap in the country narrowed from 0.34 (1 being the highest) in 1980 to 0.24 in 2004.

But while the gap is minimal in education (0.046) and health (0.099), other areas such as economic activity (0.247) and empowerment of women (0.579) showed a wider disparity between men and women.

Malaysia's ranking at the global level also confirms that there is much work to be done. Despite some improvements at the national level, its Global Gender Gap Index ranking slipped from 72 in 2006 to 101 in 2009.

"Other countries are doing better while we have stagnated in political participation and the labour force participation rate," Ng, a visiting professor at the women's development research centre at the Science University of Malaysia here, tells IPS.

"Men and women have different needs, and we have to allocate resources based on these different needs," says Chong, who is also lead organiser of a 3Gs gender conference slated for the end of July here. "In terms of jobs, the needs of women at work are different, especially when it comes to child care."

A key way of factoring in the needs of women and men and how policies might affect them differently is to push for "a responsive budget that tackles rural-urban, racial and gender gaps," says Chong. "It is not as if men and women are homogenous categories."

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