

Towards Malaysia's first woman PM

COMMENT
by Umayal Eswaran

THE United Nations (UN) cemented gender equality as a core tenet in the 1945 UN Charter. Yet, in 2024, we continue to see women and girls struggling for recognition and safety.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report of 2023 suggests closing the gap could take 131 years, needing US\$6.4 trillion (RM29.6 trillion) annually across 48 developing countries for gender equality. In 2022, military spending surpassed US\$2.2 trillion. Some priorities need to shift.

Without a deeper understanding of what drives equality and a conscious approach to tackling disparities, the coming generations may be trapped in a backward society 131 years later.

Closer to home, women's leadership in Asean reveals only a 2% increase over the past two decades. The region's politics remains predominantly male-dominated.

In Malaysia, the journey towards greater women's participation in Parliament - and ultimately having a woman prime minister - continues, inspired by the trailblazing female leaders in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Enabling women in this context can only lead to improved outcomes for all women. As they comprise half the electorate, there is great potential for increased female representation in the legislature. This can lead to inclusive policies that meet everyone's needs, paving the way for a fairer society reflecting Malaysia's diversity.

Cultural barriers to women's equality

Men predominantly hold positions shaping laws and policies and are seen as critical drivers of equality. A March 2023 Pew Research Centre report noted that among the 193 UN member states, only 13 have women heads of

government. Shockingly, many countries have never had a female leader.

This distinct lack of women in significant decision-making roles reflects how laws and policies about gender equality are considered. Gender biases also persist in modern times, with women still commonly viewed as homemakers rather than leaders in their fields.

While there has been some progress over the last century, women in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam still face cultural gender norms hindering their equal status at home, in their communities and at work.

Internalised misogyny traps many women in a cycle of self-limitation, pushing them to settle for less. Shifting this mindset is crucial. Without envisioning our freedom, we risk perpetuating this cycle for others.

Mindful gender equality dynamics

Change is not unattainable, communities must embrace the opportunity to break away from limitations so we can all equally contribute to progress. One of the most critical interventions happens at home, where outdated practices keep women and children stuck.

Many children are taught early on that men should dominate and others should accept less. This conditioning can leave girls vulnerable to abuse, with women often confined to childcare and housework roles.

When a man pursues his dreams, he typically receives support from his family and friends. No one asks him to set his dreams aside. In contrast, a woman aspiring for more is criticised for not prioritising marriage or family over career.

These outdated cultural norms continue to breed a cycle of imbalanced power that

perpetuates inequality and dissuades women and girls from stepping up, speaking out and practising autonomy.

For equality to become a norm, we must help mothers and children recognise their potential so they can define their future and encourage the teachers responsible for educating today's youth to ensure learning environments foster equality.

"Without a deeper understanding of what drives equality and a conscious approach to tackling disparities, the coming generations may be trapped in a backward society 131 years later."

Social transformation through community action

Apart from homes and families, enhancing our public and private sector ecosystems is imperative to ensure women are valued and adequately represented in policy-making roles.

Women are still highly under-represented in government bodies and local community leadership, leading to a significant gap in understanding and acceptance. People naturally find it difficult to understand something they are not regularly exposed to.

Our role models must be people the average person can relate such as teachers, farmers, creatives, small business owners, office staff, community members - everyday folk that we can recognise and trust. Women must see themselves in these role models - shifting social norms and outdated mindsets are challenging without that connection.

This is the vision Rythm Foundation has for young girls in Malaysia through the flagship Maharani Programme, where more than 8,500 young girls from disadvantaged communities have received educational and personal development assistance to excel in school and improve their lives.

By acting within our communities, we can spark significant transformations. Those of us with privilege must use our voices and role

model behaviours to guide others unsure of their place in the world. We can compel policymakers to dismantle structures perpetuating violence and inequality by uniting our voices and actions into a powerful movement.

Malaysia's path to gender parity and progress

Despite specific challenges and cultural norms, Malaysia is at a pivotal moment in its journey towards gender equality.

Boosting female representation in administration, including appointing a woman as prime minister, is crucial for advancing Malaysia's journey towards gender equality. Women bring unique perspectives that enhance governance, influencing policies across critical sectors such as healthcare, education and family welfare.

Furthermore, a woman prime minister would serve as a powerful symbol of progress and inclusivity, inspiring young girls across Malaysia to aspire to leadership roles and break traditional gender stereotypes.

Demonstrating Malaysia's commitment to gender equality through action, not just words, shows the world that women can lead government effectively and competently at the highest levels.

Achieving gender parity in political leadership fosters a more inclusive democracy and a society where everyone, regardless of gender, has an equal opportunity to contribute to and benefit from national progress.

Change has always been in our hands.

Datin Sri Umayal Eswaran is the chairperson of Rythm Foundation, the social impact initiative of the Q1 Group. She is passionate about social justice and human rights and deeply committed to empowering marginalised communities. As a passionate speaker and social impact advocate. She is also the founder of the Taarana School for children with special education needs in Malaysia. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com