

Women issues overlooked due to low political presence, analysts say
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By Ida Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 24 — The lack of female participation in Malaysian politics has likely caused the years of neglect over issues of concern to women although the gender makes up half the country's 13 million-strong electorate, analysts have said.

According to statistics from the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, only 10.4 per cent of the country's 222 federal lawmakers and eight per cent of the 576 assemblymen in state assemblies nationwide are women.

File photo of women at a political party gathering. Women make up a 'big block of votes', being 'half of the voters of every constituency'.
In total, there are 13 Barisan Nasional (BN) women MPs and 10 from Pakatan Rakyat (PR), comprising four from the DAP, and three each from PAS and PKR.

At the state level, BN women occupy 27 seats in state legislatures while PR holds 21 seats — 13 from the DAP and four each from PAS and PKR.

With the lack of female presence in politics, even the country's women affairs ministerial portfolio is currently handled by a man — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, no less.

The BN chairman had taken over the post from Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil earlier this year when the latter's senatorship was not renewed during the height of the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) scandal.

Noting the trend, Prof Dr Jayum A. Jawan, a professor of politics and government with Universiti Putra Malaysia, said women wanted to participate in the country's development but political parties have not been treating them "seriously".

He said the "lack" of women in "high decision-making positions" must be addressed, saying that there are many "capable" women in the workforce.

"Anybody who includes more women candidates will definitely appeal to the professional women."

"That is how you empower women, put more of them in Parliament," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Jayum said that women have in the past "been taken for granted", with many of them following their husbands' political views, but professional women now "have their own mind" and "start questioning".

"Besides working for votes of young people, votes of women are very important," he said, adding that they represent a "big block of votes", with women being "half of the voters of every constituency."

Faisal Hazis, a political scientist from Unimas, said that "Malaysia is still grappling with the 30 per cent women representation at the decision-making level" where women are generally "under-represented".

"There are political parties that still fail to field women candidates" such as the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP), Sarawak People's Party (PRS) and Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP), he said, but added that "some PR state governments are trying to break away from this male-dominated system."

He said women representatives often lack "quality" and "are there to fill the women quota only."

"When they are asked to sit in the federal Cabinet or state exco, it is usually to fill the women affairs portfolio."

Faisal said the participation of women in politics must bring about meaningful results.

"Ultimately, we should go beyond the women representation issue. So what if we reach the 30 per cent quota and women are still being marginalised and oppressed?"

"The 30 per cent agenda means nothing if issues or problems faced by women are not being addressed adequately by our legislation and public policies."

Lim Teck Ghee, director of the Centre for Policy Initiatives, said women wings on both sides of the political divide "are weak and basically appendages of the male-dominated parties."

"We still have a long way before there is some gender parity in leadership in politics as well as in other sectors. But I expect a lot more progress during the next few years."

One of the prime concerns of women voters that politicians must address is the economy and job opportunities, the three analysts said.

"Economic issues such as employment, inflation and rising cost of living are important to both professional women and housewives," Faisal said.

With polls drawing closer, both BN and PR have been ramping up efforts to touch-base with women voters, employing traditional door-to-door tactics to court this segment of the demographic, a method long abandoned over the years.

As both pacts are said to be locked in an almost even tussle for support, every vote is deemed crucial in the battle for Putrajaya.

PR has launched its Agenda Wanita Malaysia (AWM) initiative, promising to give women a greater voice in the administration of the country by bringing to the fore major issues of concern to women.

These issues include matters like law enforcement, increasing quality of life, providing opportunity for women to involve themselves in the economy, revamping the educational policy, social harmony and the empowerment of young women.

PR leaders have said that AWM will focus on bread-and-butter issues like safety and economy as it is believed that women vote principally on issues and established experience.

PKR president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail recently began an initiative for mothers against crime, a growing issue especially among women in urban areas. Another issue taking centre-stage over the past few weeks is the apparently lenient sentence for two men convicted of statutory rape, which both BN and PR have protested.

Muslimat PAS information chief Aiman Athirah Al-Jundi recently said that the party's women's division would go door to door, a method that worked very well previously for Wanita Umno as well.

In recent years though, this personal touch has been replaced by mass gatherings where cash handouts are given to underprivileged families but now the AWM aims to pick up where they dropped off.

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