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ALIGN REPORT

Men as allies in shaping a gender equitable society: perspectives from Malaysia

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May 2024

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About the Centre for Research on Women and Gender

The Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA) at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) began as a research project to study poverty among women and children in rural areas of northern Malaysia. Funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and comprised of a team of researchers from multiple disciplines and backgrounds, this project, known as 'Projek KANITA' (from the Malay words 'kanak-kanak', meaning children, and 'wanita' meaning women), was a major starting point for the establishment and development of women and gender studies at USM and in Malaysia.

The project evolved to become a Women and Human Resource Research Unit in 1991 and expanded the framework of its gender research to include studies on women's lives related to their employment and economic empowerment. In 2001, KANITA was institutionalised as the Women's Development Research Centre. This focus on development aligned with the government's establishment of a new Ministry of Women's Development in 2000. In 2014, the University Senate changed the name to the Centre for Research on Women and Gender to include contemporary discourse and developments in regional and global women and gender studies. The name 'KANITA' is still used to represent the women's gender studies and research structure at USM, which has been established over the course of 45 years.

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere gratitude to ALIGN and ODI for funding this project and entrusting us with the responsibility of producing a report on Malaysian male politicians, aiming to drive progress towards gender equality. A special thank you goes to Dr Ján Michalko and Dr Matthew Maycock for their invaluable input and technical guidance throughout this journey. Our appreciation extends to our research partners, José Fernando Serrano-Amaya and Carlos Iván García Suárez (from the Universidad de los Andes, Colombia), and Tanya Ansahta Garnett and Toushi Itoka (from Nunlai Research, Liberia) for their outstanding collaboration. We would also like to acknowledge the unwavering commitment of our research assistant, Nur Safira, for her dedicated assistance in compiling this report.

This report would not have come to fruition without the significant contributions and narratives provided by male and female political leaders, as well as activists advocating for political change. Their willingness to share insights and invest time in this endeavour has been instrumental. A heartfelt thank you also goes to the male and female students who actively participated in this research. Our hope is that this report is an authentic representation and recognition of the lived realities of all those involved.

This report has been prepared by Dr Zaireeni Azmi, Professor Dato' Dr Noraida Endut and Associate Professor Dr Nor Hafizah Selamat from KANITA at USM, and Dr Muhammad Rahimi Hasan from Pertubuhan Naratif Malaysia (NARATIF).

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Key findings

- Male politicians in Malaysia rarely identify themselves as feminists because of negative views of the term, instead prefering to describe themselves as women's advocates or humanists.
- While male politicians believe that they are playing a strategic role as women's advocates or humanists, their actions have had little impact on the transforming of societal norms and practices, particularly in politics. Feminist activists and female politicians do not believe men have helped or advocated effectively for women.
- Male politicians have not shown that they have collaborated with other men to advance the gender equality agenda, even if their parties formally include such an agenda in their constitutions and manifestos.
- The main obstacles to the engagement of male politicians on gender equality include their inclination to operate independently within their specific contexts, often avoiding the feminist label.
- Encouraging men to become agents of change for gender equality necessitates a deep comprehension of how their male privilege intersects with their political stance. Supportive political parties play a crucial role as facilitators in fostering transformative shifts in gender norms.
- Young people who understand the concept of gender equality feel the behaviour of some male politicians can reinforce masculine norms in politics.
- Predictably, young women are more aware of (and concerned about) the gender inequalities that permeate different aspects of their lives, including politics and decision-making, than young men. Patriarchal views continue to influence young men's worldviews, as well as dominant narratives about politics and leadership.
- Sustained, inclusive dialogue and increased engagement with male politicians in discussions about men as allies for gender equality are essential to encourage more men to embrace or endorse the feminist agenda. Collaborations with feminist organisations can enhance the quality of male politicians' allyship and generate more impactful outcomes for gender-norm transformation in Malaysia.

Acronyms

Amanah	Party Amanah Negara
BN	Barisan Nasional
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil society organisation
DAP	Democratic Action Party
FGD	Focus group discussion
GE	General elections
GE14	The general election of 2018
GE15	The general election of 2022
IDI	In-depth interview
JPWK	Jawatankuasa Pembangunan Wanita dan Keluarga (The Women and Family Development Committee)
MP	Member of Parliament
MUDA	Malaysian United Democratic Alliance
MWFCD	Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAS	Party Islam Se-Malaysia
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PKR	People's Justice Party or Parti Keadilan Rakyat
PN	Perikatan Nasional
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIS	Sisters in Islam
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

Key terms

Gender agenda. A gender agenda aims to ensure all people have equal access and opportunities for resources; enjoy equal rights; and are represented across various aspects of life, from the national to the domestic. All social and economic development efforts, including goals, initiatives and policies, aim to promote gender equality.

Gender norms. These are the societal expectations that define and prescribe behaviours, roles, and responsibilities for individuals based on their perceived gender. People are expected to behave according to these norms and they shape the understanding of masculinity and femininity.

Hegemonic masculinity. This concept, defined by Connell (2005) refers to the dominant and culturally accepted form of masculinity within a given society or cultural context. It represents a societal norm that influences expectations and perceptions of masculinity and holds the most social power.

Male allies. These are men who support and advocate for gender-inclusive policies and practices, and the dismantling of patriarchal norms and practices for the empowerment of women and the advancement of gender equality.

Malay Muslim. This refers to individuals who are ethnically Malay and adhere to the Islamic faith.

Masculinity. Socially constructed expectations of what it means to be a man, including the roles, behaviours and attributes that are considered appropriate for a man.

Masculine norms. These are the culturally grounded expectations for men's roles and behaviours.

Patriarchal bargain. A concept in feminist theory that explains the choices and compromises made by individuals, particularly women, within a patriarchal society. Through this bargain, women aim to navigate the constraints imposed upon them by society and secure a measure of power or advantage (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Toxic masculinity. This is the promotion of domination, homophobia, and aggression stemming from specific notions of 'manliness'.

Women's advocate. An individual who works to address issues related to gender equality, women's rights and social justice. This person actively supports and promotes the rights, interests and well-being of women.

Women's agenda. This is closely related to the gender agenda but focuses primarily on issues that have a direct impact on women.

Introduction

> **For me, what's important is whether you are genuinely working towards changing and improving women's livelihoods, their social status, and defending their rights. I think the main category I would like to place myself in is one that cares about marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, and I want to help empower them to protect their rights.**
> Male, Chinese, left-wing political party and a state legislature representative

Malaysia is committed to the promotion of women's political participation, in line with its commitments to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2004, the government agreed to implement a quota to ensure women account for at least 30% of decision-making positions in the public sector, with a similar policy adopted in 2011 for the private sector (Azmi et al., forthcoming). There is, however, a problem: a continued lack of women's representation in leadership positions in politics after 65 years of independence.

The country's 2022 general election (GE15) saw the largest ever number of female candidates, with 187 women nominated for state assembly and parliamentary seats. Yet they still accounted for only 13.48% of all candidates, and a continued lack of women ministers reflects the persistently low numbers of women in leadership positions.

This acute gender imbalance in Malaysia's political leadership reflects a persistent patriarchal norm and culture in the political arena, which places men at the higher levels as party leaders, election candidates and cabinet ministers. A misogynist culture remains rampant in politics. In 2007, for example, a male Member of Parliament (MP) compared the leaking ceiling of the parliament building to a woman's period, saying of a female MP that she 'leaked' every month. Sadly, not only were his disgraceful comments met with laughter, but not a single male MP stood up to defend her (Jeffrey, 2007). In the most recent general election in 2022, another male politician belittled women and suggested they could not serve a rural constituency (Indramalar, 2022).

Nevertheless, there are male politicians who support action on gender equality. In October 2023, for example, a Forum on Women Leadership in Politics that advocated for more women candidates in GE15 was attended by senior leaders, both male and female, from various political parties. They all pledged their commitment to the target of having at least 30% of women candidates in the upcoming elections, and senior male leaders from three major political parties expressed their willingness to support the women's agenda.

Male leaders who are openly supportive of the gender equality agenda and are committed to its achievement have been working in close collaboration with their female counterparts and women's organisations. They are part of a larger group of male leaders who recognise the need to promote gender equality and create greater opportunities for women in politics.

There is, however, a lack of studies from Malaysia that investigate the potential impact of these male politicians on changing norms, attitudes and behaviours among men in positions of power. To date, no studies have taken an in-depth look at how far Malaysian male politicians are willing to share their

positions of power and leadership with their female counterparts, and there are many questions about their motivations and impact:

- Do they think the women's agenda is as important as other national agendas?
- Are there many Malaysian men, particularly political leaders, who understand and internalise the importance of gender equality in society?
- Are they willing to promote or support gender equality and the women's empowerment agenda in their parties or the government?
- Are they willing to endure the labelling and disapproval they might face from the rest of society in order to foster an increase in women's representation and gender equality in politics?
- Do they embrace feminist positions?

This study, the first of its kind in Malaysia, aims to fill these gaps. It explores how gender norms and other factors can foster an environment where men can adopt (pro)-feminist and gender-equitable political identities and have a positive impact on the harmful hegemonic patriarchal norms across society. The examination of how alternative gender norms emerge in politics can enhance understanding of how to cultivate them in countries that have high levels of gender inequality.

This report's findings are based on 22 interviews with key stakeholders, including male and female politicians, and male and female activists. In addition, six focus group discussions were organised with male and female students. This study is part of a collaborative and comparative research initiative that also gathers perspectives from Colombia and Liberia (see Michalko et al., 2024, for a cross-country overview and analysis).

This research aims to provide valuable insights that can inform strategies and interventions to target inequitable masculinities and foster positive changes in the norms, attitudes, and behaviours of men in positions of political power. This is crucial for the future of Malaysia, given that the active dismantling of masculine norms can pave the way for a more equitable, inclusive and democratic society that values the potential contributions of all citizens, regardless of their gender. At the same time, the failure to address the lack of gender equality and the persistence of masculine norms in politics carries substantial consequences and potential risks, not least the lack of political representation for women, resulting in an incomplete democratic process.

Malaysia's political context

This section sets out Malaysia's political context and structure, and its current discourse on masculinity and gender equality in politics. It does so in a context of the slow development of scholarship on masculinities in South and Southeast Asia in comparison to other regions, resulting in a notable void in the scholarly debates on Asian and Malaysian men, including those in politics (Nur Syuhada et al., 2018).

As part of its commitment to CEDAW, Malaysia established the Ministry of Women's Development in 2001 (now known as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development) and amended Article 8 (2) of its Federal Constitution to include a prohibition on gender discrimination. These steps have been important for the advancement of women in Malaysia, but the achievement of full gender equality faces persistent challenges, particularly in the areas of politics and decision-making.

In 2020, the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia introduced its Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). The former male minister, who made the announcement, pledged not only to enhance women's representation in decision-making within the Ministry, but also to implement a gender-responsive budget to turn those promises into reality. However, despite the announcement of the FFP, no concrete steps have been taken to officially endorse it and it remains simply an interesting development for Malaysia amid the global discourse on gender equality.

A unique political system

Malaysia's political system, unique within the Southeast Asia region, is comprised of a federal constitutional monarchy alongside a parliamentary democracy. It follows the Westminster system of Parliament and the doctrine of a separation of powers. Malaysia operates a federal system, with power divided between the federal government and the country's 13 states: 11 of them in Peninsular Malaysia, and two in Borneo: Sarawak and Sabah. Each of these 13 states has its own legislature. Malaysia also has three federal territories: Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya.

The country's national legal system is comprised of the legislature, executive and judiciary. The primary function of the legislature is to enact laws, analyse government policies, and represent the interests of the people. The executive branch includes various ministries and government agencies that are responsible for implementing laws, formulating policies and managing the administration of the country. The judiciary is independent and plays a crucial role in ensuring the rule of law, protecting citizen rights and resolving disputes.

The legislature has the most powers and functions, but these are balanced and controlled by the executive judiciary through limits on its powers, procedures for the exercise of powers, and controls over the exercise of powers. In addition, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet members are accountable to the legislature and are subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

Malaysia's head of the state is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (the King), chosen from among the hereditary rulers of nine Malay states for a five-year term. The head of government is the Prime Minister, who is the leader of the political party that commands the majority in the lower house of Parliament, known as the Dewan Rakyat.

Malaysia follows a bicameral legislative system, with the Dewan Rakyat and the Dewan Negara (Senate) as its two chambers. The Dewan Rakyat is composed of 222 MPs who are elected by the citizens through general elections, while the Dewan Negara is comprised of senators who are appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong on the advice of the Prime Minister and State rulers. Women account for just 14.4% of the 222 MPs, and only 13.55% of Malaysia's senators. The representatives

of Dewan Rakyat are chosen in general elections and are elected for maximum term of office of five years.

Malaysia has had four Prime Ministers since 2020. The Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition had been in power for over 60 years until the 2018 general elections when the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) coalition secured victory. However, political upheavals in 2020 shortened the tenure of Pakatan Harapan, and power struggles between political factions plunged the country into a state of political uncertainty until the general election in 2022.

The current Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim, who leads Pakatan Harapan, took office in 2022. Anwar's involvement in the Reformasi movement and his ongoing political struggle and activism have positioned him as a central figure in the fight for political change and democratic advancement in Malaysia. His government comprises 28 Ministers and 27 Deputy Ministers, with women holding 17.8% and 29.63% of these positions, respectively. Malaysia's key statistics are summarised in Box 1.

Box 1: Malaysia: key statistics

Population	Ethnicity	Religion
3.37 million • 17.5 million male • 15.9 million female	• 69.4% Bumiputera (Malay) • 23.2% Chinese • 6.7% Indian • 0.7% Other	• 20.6 million Muslims • 6.1 million Buddhists • 2.9 million Christians • 2 million Hindus • 860,000 other

Source: DOSM (2023); Noor (2009)

Malaysia's gender gaps

Malaysia ranks 102nd out of 146 countries according to the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) Report, behind neighbouring countries such as Singapore (49), Thailand (74) and Indonesia (87). While Malaysia has reached gender parity in education and is doing well in terms of the GGGI health and survival sub-index, there are clear gender gaps in economic participation and political empowerment. There is, for example, a huge gap between the number of female graduates who enter the workforce compared to men.

The gender gap in political participation, particularly at the leadership level, remains problematic. Here, Malaysia has a score of 0.098, indicating that women's progress in this sub-index is too slow and insufficient, reflecting a persistent gender gap between men and women and male domination of the political sector.

As mentioned, Malaysia adopted a policy to ensure a minimum quota of 30% representation of women in decision-making roles within the public sector in 2004, with a similar target set for the corporate sector in 2011. These representation targets were only met in June 2023, which underscores the sticky nature of unequal gender norms between men and women in politics, and the slow pace of progress. As of June 2023, the representation of women in decision-making roles within the public sector had reached 38.8% (Dewan Rakyat, 2023). However, the goal of 30% representation of women in similar positions within the private and corporate sectors has not yet been reached. Table 1 summarises the under-representation of women in political leadership between 1982 and 2023.

Table 1: Percentage of female candidates and female elected Members of Parliament (1982-2022)

Number of female candidates					Number of female MPs			
Year	Women	Men	Total	% Women	Women	Men	Total	% Women
1982	8	371	379	2.1	8	146	154	5.2
1986	7	449	458	1.5	7	170	177	4.0
1990	14	384	398	3.5	11	169	180	6.1
1995	25	395	420	6.0	15	177	192	7.8
1999	30	399	429	7.0	20	173	13	10.4
2004	34	412	446	7.6	22	197	219	10.0
2008	45	434	476	9.4	24	198	222	10.8
2013	56	532	579	9.7	25	198	222	10.4
2018	75	612	678	10.9	32	190	222	14.4
2022	127	818	945	13.4	32	190	222	14.4

Source: Tan (2011), Sheikh (2013) and Azmi et. al. (forthcoming).

Table 1 also illustrates the fluctuations in the percentages of women candidates nominated for parliamentary seats since 1982, ranging from 2.1% to 9.7%. There were notable increases in 2018, when the percentage increased to 10.9%, and in 2022, when it rose to 13.4%. Despite these improvements the percentages are still falling far short of the 30% target. The historical trend in the percentage of women elected to Malaysia's Parliament was generally low until the 1999 election when it reached 10.4%. The highest proportion of women elected was observed in 2018 (14.4%), and this percentage was maintained in the 2022 general elections.

Malaysian men and masculinities

Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality because, according to the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD):

> **'in most societies, men exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life, ranging from personal decisions regarding the size of families to the policy and programme decisions taken at all levels of Government.'**
> (ICPD,1994: 27)

The predominant culture in any society will determine whether there is adherence to masculine traits and inequitable gender norms (see, e.g., Endut et al., 2020; Tagger and Good, 2005). Connell (2005) claimed that while there are various forms of masculinities, there is a prevailing or culturally sanctioned way in which men are expected to behave and that this is 'hegemonic masculinity'. This is a prevailing construct that influences not just the dynamics between men and women, but also the interactions among men themselves (Ismail, 2014). The concept comes from the idea of hegemony, as developed by Connell, which suggests that specific expressions of masculinity that are culturally celebrated, and that become the norm, play a role in shaping power dynamics within a society.

Ng et al. (2008) found that the key qualities associated with masculinity differ across the five Asian nations they studied, namely China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia. While society in China, for example, puts a high value on men's wealth, the priority for Japanese men is to behave with honour

and integrity. Malaysian men see securing a respectable job as a paramount manly trait. Nur Syuhada et al. (2018) also indicate that the significance of being 'financially powerful' as a symbol of manhood has diminished among Malaysian males, yet male displays of emotion, such as crying, are seen as socially unacceptable.

Other studies have highlighted characteristics that are seen as masculine. Abdul Rahim (2013) describes six common behaviours displayed by men: determined, commitment phobic, anti-female, womaniser, traditional and corporate-like, while Goh (2012) notes masculine ideals of: power, strength, sexual virility, and patriarchal authority. In other words, masculinity often emphasises traits such as dominance and competitiveness, which may dissuade men from forming supportive and collaborative relationships with women.

In addition, patriarchal masculine norms have adverse implications for family planning and the reproductive health of women. Many husbands, for example, oppose the use of contraceptives, not least because impregnating a woman validates their masculinity, with men expected to be sexually assertive, while women are regarded as passive participants (Endut et al., 2020).

Masculinity is also a social expectation, with a belief that males possess inherent qualities that are characteristic of their masculine gender, and it is important for females to comprehend and acknowledge such distinctions (Abdul Rahim, 2013). While these 'traditional' males are polite, calm (and even have a 'moderate' fashion sense), they are also often domineering and patronising (Abdul Rahim, 2013). Fazli Khalaf et al. (2013) found the concept of masculinity among university students is related to a combination of traditional and non-traditional norms that, in general, favour men who adhere to culturally dominant role expectations. This includes traits like having an appealing physique and earning respect among university students.

The varied meanings of masculinities are shaped by experiences learned in each social context. While these norms can be described as hegemonic masculinity, as outlined earlier, the expectations of younger men are now changing. As a result, young men in Malaysia are increasingly exposed to other cultures and lifestyles and this is influencing their perceptions of masculinity and gender roles.

Nevertheless, discourse on masculinity remains limited in Malaysia, and key concepts such as 'gender', 'sexuality', and 'feminism' are absent from the everyday lexicon of Malaysians. Such terms tend to be confined to academic, activist and human rights discourse in English, reflecting the country's bilingual fabric (Izharuddin, 2013).

When Goh et al. (2021) asked Malaysians, 'How would you describe feminism?' they received only the most basic definition: feminism means equal rights and opportunities, and it is a movement to end the systematic inequalities faced by women. Some Malaysians claim that feminism is not truly indigenous to the country, with opposition to feminism within this group rooted in Islamic beliefs, rather than a rejection of women's rights. This allows them to challenge feminist initiatives such as Sisters in Islam (SIS) without being explicitly labelled as 'anti-feminist' (Alatas, 2023). They see feminist ideology as a subtle form of Western influence that is potentially harmful to Malaysian society because of its perceived 'incompatibility' with Islam. Alatas (2023) finds that no attempt is made to differentiate among various feminist movements or ideologies: for these opponents, western feminist ideals have no place in a Muslim culture.

Overall, however, conceptualisations of masculinity are used by ethnically Malay men as a tool to exert influence, to manipulate and to compete over the interpretation of Islam, all of which are essential for their maintenance of power. One strategy to secure the support of the Malay electorate (and influence in the political arena) is to gain religious endorsement – a strategy that includes controlling the definitions of masculinity and male sexuality (Goh, 2012). Political credibility can be established by reinforcing a tightly controlled association between Malay identity and Islam.

Patriarchal norms in politics

Male allyship to promote gender equality is essential in a country where women's political representation has been low ever since independence. While key political parties, including the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) have a majority of female members, they are often relegated to lesser roles such as being party workers during elections, supporting party aspirations through political activities, supporting the decisions of party leadership, and recruiting new members through a variety of social and religious activities (Azmi, 2020).

After the 2013 general elections, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), PKR and PAS, governed three states (Penang, Selangor, and Kelantan). Following the coalition's dissolution and the 2018 general election, Pakatan Harapan (PH), comprised of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, PKR, DAP, and Parti Amanah Negara, won three additional states (Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor). There are now around 63 political parties and five political coalitions in Malaysia.

Four major parties exhibit distinct political identities and ideologies, with memberships extending across both West and East Malaysia. PAS is an Islamist-leaning party that is perceived as conservative despite having a wing for non-Muslim supporters. The PKR promotes multiculturalism and liberal democracy, in contrast to UMNO which promotes Malay nationalism. The DAP is known to promote multi-culturalism and social democracy. Both the PKR and DAP have extended their membership to include individuals from all ethnic backgrounds, yet DAP members are largely Chinese, while PKR members are predominantly Malays.

The states won by both PR and PH have demonstrated a proactive approach towards women's involvement in decision-making at various levels through several women-friendly policies and initiatives. For example, the late Chief Minister of Kelantan, a PAS leader who governed the state from 1990 to 2013, applied the informal practice of appointing two female Senators to represent the state in the upper house of the Parliament of Malaysia (Azmi, 2017), a practice abandoned by subsequent state leaders (Azmi et al., forthcoming). Under his leadership, Kelantan also appointed 45 'Penghulu Wanita Tanpa Mukim' (non-district women chiefs) throughout the state (Azmi, 2017).

In 2020, Penang state introduced 'Sidang Wanita Penang', a simulation of the Penang State Assembly that aimed to support, encourage and train women leaders (Maznah, 2018). Participants included women from various political parties and backgrounds. Similar platforms have also been established in the states of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan (Azmi et. al., forthcoming). Despite these efforts, the percentage of women in Parliament, state assemblies or any other political institutions remains below 20%.

Men continue to dominate representation within political parties and as candidates for elections. The lack of women's advancement in political leadership sits at odds with wider and significant improvements over the last 20 years in the participation of women across many professional domains (Saidon and Sity, 2017; Syahirah et al., 2016). There has also been a notable increase in the number of women enrolling in higher education institutions, including universities, with a total of 210,897 compared to male students of 161,113 (MOHE, 2020).

Three factors that drive women's under-representation.

There are many factors contribute to women's low representation in political leadership as reported by local scholars (Zakuan, 2022a; Saidon, 2022, Sheikh, 2022; Azmi, 2017; Sheikh, 2013). This report discusses three key factors driving women's under-representation in Malaysia's politics, all of them embedded in country's political system and history: a lack of equitable opportunities provided by

political parties; the violence and harassment faced by women politicians; and the patriarchal culture of politics, which often results in 'patriarchal bargaining.'

A lack of equitable opportunities

Men dominate the upper echelons of political parties and, as noted, women are seen primarily as party supporters and assistants – reflecting the belief that men are more suited to leadership than women (Sheikh, 2022). Women are also often perceived as more suitable candidates for addressing matters related to education, healthcare, and women's affairs as a result of assumptions about their assumed nurturing and compassionate qualities. In addition, they are also regarded as less desirable for executive positions because of negative stereotypes that portray them as emotional, indecisive and easily influenced (Yeong, 2018).

According to Yeong (2018), Malay men feel vulnerable when confronted with the prospect of women attaining political authority. The prevalence of male dominance among party gatekeepers significantly influences the gendered dynamics of candidate selection and leadership prospects inside the party (Yeong, 2018). Party gatekeepers tend to select and advance candidates who share their own characteristics (Yeong, 2018). This means that women must garner support, not just from female constituents, but also from their male counterparts, proving their competence and capabilities to male leaders to gain recognition for their leadership qualities (Saidon, 2022).

Maznah (2018) highlights political party structures as an impediment for women's leadership within and outside their parties. Similarly, Zakuan (2022a) concludes that male dominance prevents women from holding leadership position. Azmi et al. (forthcoming) finds that prevailing patriarchal social attitudes are a key impediment to women's political engagement, perpetuating the entrenched belief in men as superior leaders. This perception is deeply ingrained, and depicts men as more dominant, assertive and adept in politics, with superior networking and political knowledge. Furthermore, the political institutions in Malaysia exhibit a pronounced masculine culture, characterised by the predominance of men in decision-making roles (Gume, 2014; Aminuddin, 2023; Azmi et al., forthcoming), contributing to policy formulation, and holding leadership positions. This masculine dominance is, in part, a reflection of entrenched societal expectations and beliefs regarding gender roles and behaviours.

The low rate of female leadership is determined by the formal political structures that segregate men and women by establishing women's wings, and by the informal patronage system. Male politicians leverage networks and financial resources to advance their political careers, which are not readily available to women (Gume, 2014; Bernama, 2018; Aminuddin, 2023).

One example is the experience of Khatijah Sidek, a former leader of the UMNO Women's Wing, who was dismissed from her position within UMNO for expressing her concerns about gender-based injustices and the lack of opportunities for women to assume leadership roles (Sheikh, 2022). Former female minister Rafidah Aziz asserts that despite a general rise in UMNO party membership, women continue to lag far behind in terms of representation in the upper echelons of the party (Bernama, 2018).

Initiatives by women's factions of political organisations, civil society groups, media outlets, and governmental bodies tend to be ignored by party leaders, as are the opinions voiced by female wing leaders (Sheikh, 2022). For example, women leaders and a former minister from a major political coalition have stressed the need to allocate a minimum of 30% of female candidates, yet this target has not been reached (Sheikh, 2022) and only two political parties have outlined a women's quota for leadership roles in their constitutions: DAP and PKR (Azmi et al. forthcoming).

Political will can be translated into a party's constitution that asserts the need to include more women in the decision-making process (see Box 2).

Box 2: Women in the Democratic Action Party (DAP)

None of the political parties included in this study have fielded a minimum of 30% female candidates in Malaysia's elections, and they still lack the minimum of 30% female representation at the leadership level within their party structures. While Parti Keadilan Rakyat has moved to ensure a minimum representation of 30% women in leadership roles, as evidenced by the inclusion of Clause 5 (5.14) in their constitution, it is the Democratic Action Party (DAP) that stands out as the only political party that explicitly specifies in its constitution that at least 30% of seats in its Central Executive Committee (CEC) must be reserved for women who participate in the party's internal elections. The importance of political will emerges as a crucial factor in creating an enabling environment for women politicians, particularly in the context of politics permeated with masculine norms and practices. DAP has fielded female candidates in winnable seats since 2013, and all its women candidates in the 2018 general election (GE14) were voted in. The success rate of its female candidates in 2023 is also higher than any other political party in Malaysia.

The lack of quotas among political parties is a structural barrier for women's decision-making in politics. Male politicians themselves may reinforce this barrier, reluctant to implement a legal mandate that could reduce their political power (Ragu, 2022). Some female politicians also oppose mandated quotas, seeing them as devaluing and discrediting their abilities (Abu Bakar, 2018; Palansamy, 2022). For example, the former female Minister of International Trade and Industry, Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, strongly opposes a gender quota, stating that women are more than 'quota fillers' (Arof, 2024).

Violence and harassment

Women are subjected to various forms of violence and harassment, including psychological, which deters them from engaging in public debates. One male politician, for example, has made derogatory remarks about the name of a fellow female politician, saying that 'Kok is the sole female member within this parliamentary body who possesses 'kok'' (Mstar, 2016; Zakuan, 2022b). The use of such explicit language should be seen as behaviour that is unbecoming for a political figure: a display of sexism and disrespect.

There is also a climate of impunity for public attacks against female politicians. In March 2023, for example, a Facebook user called for the gang rape of a female politician, Nurul Izzah Anwar, who is also Senior Economic and Financial Advisor to the Prime Minister (and also his daughter), because he was angry about a government decision to stop withdrawals from the Employees' Provident Fund (Syahrul, 2023). While the Minister of Communication and Digital reported this matter to the police, there was little response from political parties, particularly male politicians. Similarly, two female politicians became the target for online harassment in 2020, receiving racist messages, as well as rape and death threats (theSun, 2020).

One male politician has cast doubt on women's competence to manage responsibilities, address issues and handle complaints from their constituents at any hour of the day, with criticism of his comments coming entirely from female politicians and leaders. This politician's TikTok gained over 164,000 followers when he opened his new account in less than 24 hours. In addition, when he swatted a female student's head and justified it as a joke it sent a message that it is fine to be disrespectful to females in public. Despite some of the women leaders having called for the male politician to apologise, the student's mother said the act was not an issue and there is no need for him to apologise (Hamid, 2023).

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes by male leaders influences how Malaysian men view women's capabilities and abilities. More recently, while debating the 2024 budget, a male MP responded to queries from a female MP about visitors to Langkawi being harassed by local authorities for their attire by inviting her to visit Langkawi 'wearing nothing' (Gimino, Rahim & Yunus, 2023).

The patriarchal culture in politics – and patriarchal bargaining

Women's representation in political leadership is also constrained by the patriarchal culture in politics, particularly in the structure of political parties and the absence of a legal framework to promote women's leadership (Zakuan, 2022a; Azmi et al., 2023). These obstacles are linked to the core issue of cultural and religious gendered norms for men and women in politics, which privilege men and reinforce their social status to dominate politics. Women in political leadership on the other hand are perceived as less capable and expected to deal with only feminist issues. As a result, women are continuously excluded from the political process.

Women often feel compelled to adapt to and indirectly endorse patriarchal practices (Azman et al., 2017). This aligns with the notion of patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988): the way in which female politicians work strategically to promote change. In their efforts to gain social acceptance, protection or opportunities, female politicians in Malaysia may identify as much as possible with the societal norms of being good and pious women, daughters or mothers. The current Minister of Education, for instance, is adept at handling parliamentarians who interrupt her by calling her a 'teacher'. She sometimes refers to herself with this term when making her points (Wartawan Sinarplus, 2023). This often elicits laughter from other politicians and is not perceived as a threat by male counterparts.

Despite all of these obstacles, a few female politicians have made an historic leap to take on leadership roles. One example is Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Malaysia's pioneering female Deputy Prime Minister from 2018 to 2020 (see Box 3). A number of other women who are well-known advocates and activists from civil society have also moved into the political domain (Azmi et al., 2023; Sood, 2022; Maznah, 2018). However, Derichs (2013) has claimed that male-dynastic connections have helped some women to further their political careers, such as Kasthurirani Patto, Lim Hui Yin and many more.

Box 3: A pioneering female Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia: Wan Azizah Wan Ismail

In 2018, Malaysia saw the appointment of its first female Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who concurrently held the position of the 1st President of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, the current ruling government.

Source: Ishak (2019).

While Wan Azizah was not the first female leader of a Malaysian political party, her pioneering role remains noteworthy. In 1999, she played a key role in establishing the Parti Keadilan Nasional, later known as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Her election as the party president made her only the second woman in Malaysia to become a party leader. The first was Ganga Nayar, who founded and served as the inaugural president of the Malaysian Workers' Party in 1978.

Gender and political parties at state level

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy with three tiers of government – federal, state and local – and holds regular elections for both central and state positions. Within this federal system, powers and responsibilities are divided between the federal government, which oversees national matters, including

defence, foreign affairs and economic planning, while the states are responsible for areas such as land, agriculture, local government and Islamic affairs. Each state is led by its own Sultan or Ruler as the head of state, and a Chief Minister oversees state administration and implements policies within the federal constitutional framework. As of April 2024, none of these positions are held by women.

Malaysia has a first-past-the-post electoral system and the candidate with the highest vote count secures the single seat for each constituency. A party or coalition must secure two-thirds of the contested parliamentary seats to establish a majority government, which equates to winning a minimum of 112 parliamentary seats out of the 222 contested.

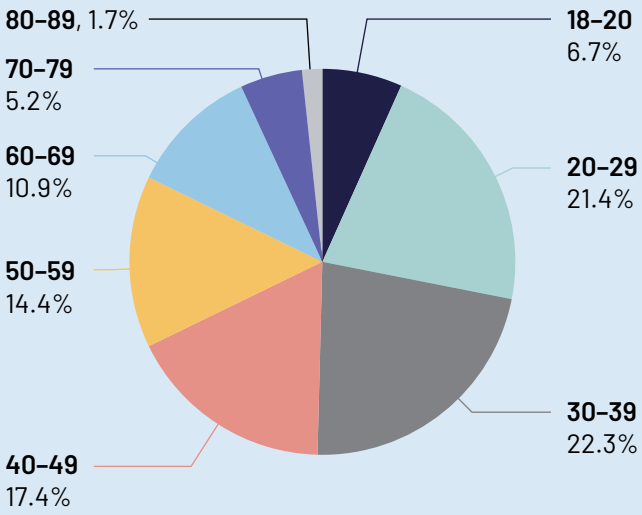
While key male leaders have made public pledges to increase women's representation, they have not yet delivered on their promises. For example, before GE15 in 2022, a coalition led by the National Council of Women's Organisation (NCWO), PantauPRU15[1], invited the leaders of all political parties to an event to promote the 30% quota for women candidates. Three male leaders and five female leaders attended the event, and all pledged to ensure this target was met. When the election took place, however, none of the parties reached this target. DAP fielded the highest percentage (25.5%) of female candidates, exceeding the total percentage for women candidates of 13.5%. With the exception of one candidate, every DAP female candidate won her contest.

Young people are playing an increasingly crucial role in reshaping electoral politics (see Box 4 for the percentage of voters by age group). The voter turnout for Malaysians aged between 18 and 30 in GE15 was 75.6% and they formed the largest category in the six state elections in 2023 (Bernama, 2023).

Box 4: Youth and 'Vote18' ('Undi18')

Undi18, a youth movement in Malaysia, campaigned effectively for the revision of Article 119(1) of the Federal Constitution to lower the country's minimum voting age from 21 to 18 years old. The revised law also introduces automatic voter registration and recognises the rights of young people to participate in the democratic process and build a more inclusive and representative political landscape. Around 1.4 million young people aged 18 to 20 voted. Among those aged 18 to 30, 37% expressed their support for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) party, which emerged as the main winner in 46% of the polling districts with the youngest voters (Malaysiakini, 2023).

Malaysia voters by age group in GE15



Source: Astro Awani (2022)

1 PantauPRU15 originates from the Resolution of the Women's Leadership Forum in Politics organised by the National Council of Women's Organizations Malaysia (NCWO), the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM), and the Malaysian Women Political Leaders Council (COMWEL) on October 5, 2022. The resolution demands a minimum of 30% women representation as candidates in the 15th General Election (PRU15) and beyond.

One party that is growing in popularity among young people is the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), a new, youth-centred political party, which was led by a 31-year-old male law graduate. More than half of its candidates (52.2%) for the five state by-elections (PRN) in 2023 were women. MUDA also fielded the largest number female candidates in the state of Johor (Ova, 2022) (see Box 5).

Box 5: Malaysia United Democratic Alliance

The Malaysia United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) party, or 'Ikatan Demokratik Malaysia', is unique among Malaysia's political parties in that it does not have separate wings for women or youth. The party's top leaders come from diverse backgrounds and include young women, and it is popular with young people. The party's former president, Syed Saddiq is often referred to as an agent of change (Khoo, 2020; Loh, 2022) and played a pivotal role in the passing of the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2019, known as the Undi18 Bill, which lowered the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 years old. MUDA is committed to inclusivity across all groups and promotes a bipartisan approach.

The party tackles sensitive issues such as the role of religion in government, gender equality and the rights of LGBTQI+ people (Khoo, 2020). It has also made a bold decision to withdraw from an alliance with the ruling party or the opposition coalition, positioning itself as a 'third force' in Malaysian politics by becoming an alternative opposition party. Syed Saddiq has been an active advocate for women's leadership in various interviews and has strongly criticised an investigation into the Women's March 2023, which was alleged to promote LGBTQI+ rights (Nagotra, 2023). Whether MUDA will stay true to the cause of gender equality will remain to be seen.

An initiative by PAS to create more opportunities for women to reach decision-making positions has also received support from the most progressive male members of the party (Azmi et al., forthcoming). The initiative aims to nominate women for the position of Deputy President of the party, implement the informal reservation of two seats in the Dewan Negara, and appoint non-district women chiefs ('Penghulu Wanita Tanpa Mukim'). Yet the number of women candidates still lags far behind that of men, who continue to hold the party's leadership positions.

Research questions, objectives and methodology

This study forms part of a cross-country collaborative research project, 'Men in Politics as Agents of Gender Equitable Change' conducted in Colombia, Liberia and Malaysia with leaders who support feminist foreign policies (for more information on research design please see Michalko et al., 2024). The cross-country study explores the factors that drive male politicians to advocate for gender equality initiatives. It also examines how gender norms and various factors contribute to the creation of an environment where male politicians can adopt pro-feminist and gender-equitable political identities. The cross-country study aims to understand how such identities can challenge harmful patriarchal norms within broader society.

The politicians who participated in this study were selected for two reasons. First, the power and influence they wield in their respective roles. Second, the significant role of their performance on gender in shaping public perceptions, influenced by the extent of democratic openness and competition within their specific context.

The cross-country project asks three questions, as follows.

1. How do male politicians who work on and speak about gender equality issues understand and communicate their politics with regards to feminism?

2. How do gender norms and other factors shape the way in which these men enact their gender agenda and the type of masculinities they demonstrate in the political sphere?

3. How do women in politics, activists and students perceive the activities of men in politics who engage with the gender equality agenda, and do they see any changes in gender norms and masculinities as a result?

Three additional research questions were asked in the case of Malaysia, as follows:

1. How do male politicians identify with feminism?

2. What motivates male politicians to engage in gender equality agendas?

3. What are the actions taken by these men in politics when promoting gender equality?

Research methodology

This study applies a gender lens and qualitative methods, based on interviews and focus groups discussions (FGDs) to explore and understand the subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings that individuals attribute to their lived experiences. For the study, selected male and female politicians, gender equality/feminist activists, university students and journalists who possess relevant knowledge and experiences, were interviewed. FGDs were held with university students, some of whom belong to the 1.4 million new voters aged 18-20 and the 4.6 million aged 21-29 who were eligible to participate in GE15 and the state election in 2023 (Gibaja, 2022). The discussions enabled respondents to share their perspectives on how (pro)feminist politicians and gender equality champions shaped societal perceptions of masculinities and gender norms.

Research design was developed collaboratively by research partners in all three countries with the ALIGN researchers, and similar approaches have been used across the study countries to identify and recruit respondents. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Ethical Committee of ODI and USM Human Research Ethic Committee (JEPeM).

The identification of male politicians who could be categorised as feminist, pro-feminist and pro-gender equality was a key challenge. 16 potential respondents, including nine male politicians from political parties within the governing and opposition coalitions, all of whom were MPs and engaged with women's issues (either pro or against) as reflected in their political statements, were identified. In addition, two gender equality/feminist activists, two journalists, one senior official from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, and two academic experts were identified. The interviews with politicians were supplemented by interviews with seven journalists and activists. This helped to triangulate the data from politicians and shed further light on the perceptions of politicians' masculinities.

Malaysia was entering an election period in six states at the time this research began, and this made it difficult to secure interviews with any politicians, male or female, including the small number of male politicians who had agreed to participate. As a result, efforts to contact potential respondents were postponed until after the elections.

Ultimately, the researchers decided to approach other male politicians recommended by female politicians who perceived them as advocates for women's causes. Journalists and activists were identified based on their expertise in gender equality discourse, as well as the researchers' experience of working with them. Female politicians were chosen for their positions as female leaders and their willingness to participate in interviews. All politicians who participated in this study were candidates in either GE15 or the state elections in 2023 (see Table 2 for more details on the research participants).

Data collection

A snowballing method was used, with initial respondents asked to recommend other eligible male politicians to participate. Potential respondents were contacted by phone and WhatsApp to invite them to participate in the study and arrange interviews. Feminist activist and journalists were also contacted through the researchers' networks.

The interviews covered the politicians' personal histories, their journey into politics, and their involvement in feminist or gender equality work. They delved into their gendered experiences at various stages of life, including their early formative years and education. The interviews focused on their assessment of the political culture, gendered experiences in politics, and their overall perspectives on Malaysia's political situation. The interviews, which took between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted face-to-face and online through Webex. They were conducted in Bahasa Melayu, English, or a mixture of both languages.

The FGDs with male and female university students from various public educational institutions explored whether and how male politicians shape other people's masculinities and norms. A total of 37 respondents were recruited to take part in six FGDs, with six to seven respondents in each group with the exception of one all-female FGD with five participants.

The students were aged from 20 to 23, mostly Malay, predominantly majoring in social sciences, material sciences or computer science, while others are studying biology, communication, business and education. The FGDs were single sex to ensure a comfortable environment and enable participants to express their opinions, experiences and concerns freely, particularly when discussing sensitive topics related to gender.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the interviewed participants

Type of participants	Age	Ethnicity	Political party/ organisation	Experience in politics	Political position
9 Male politicians	31-36 yrs = 4 45-49 yrs = 3 59-60 yrs = 2	Malay = 7 Chinese = 2	Ruling party = 7 Opposition party = 2	All were candidates in GE 15 and by state election 2023 but two lost.	Seven are currently part of ruling government at the federal and state level.
5 Female politicians	42-46 yrs = 3 57 yrs = 1 66 yrs = 1	Malay = 3 Chinese = 2	Amanah = 1 PAS = 1 DAP = 2 MUDA = 1	All won their contested seat in GE 15 and by state election except for one.	Three of them are serving as decision makers at state levels. The other two are women leaders in their respective parties.
7 journalists/ activists		Chinese male = 3 Indian male = 1 Malay female = 3	Journalist = 2 Activists = 4 Government officer = 1	Actively pursuing and promoting gender equality.	Members of political party = 5

The FGDs took place in locations that were convenient for most participants within each group. Two FGDs were held in Penang, two in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, and two were conducted online to overcome the challenges of bringing respondents together in person on the same day. The FGDs were also recorded to allow the researcher or facilitator to review the exchanges among members of the group and any non-verbal communication. Most FGDs lasted between 90 to 120 minutes.

Research team members asked for the respondents' consent before the interviews and FGDs. Respondents were provided with clear and detailed information about the study objectives and procedures, and any potential risks and benefits, as well as an informed consent form in Malay or English. They were also informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of their data, and the way in which their personal information would be stored securely, accessible only to researchers and used only for research purposes.

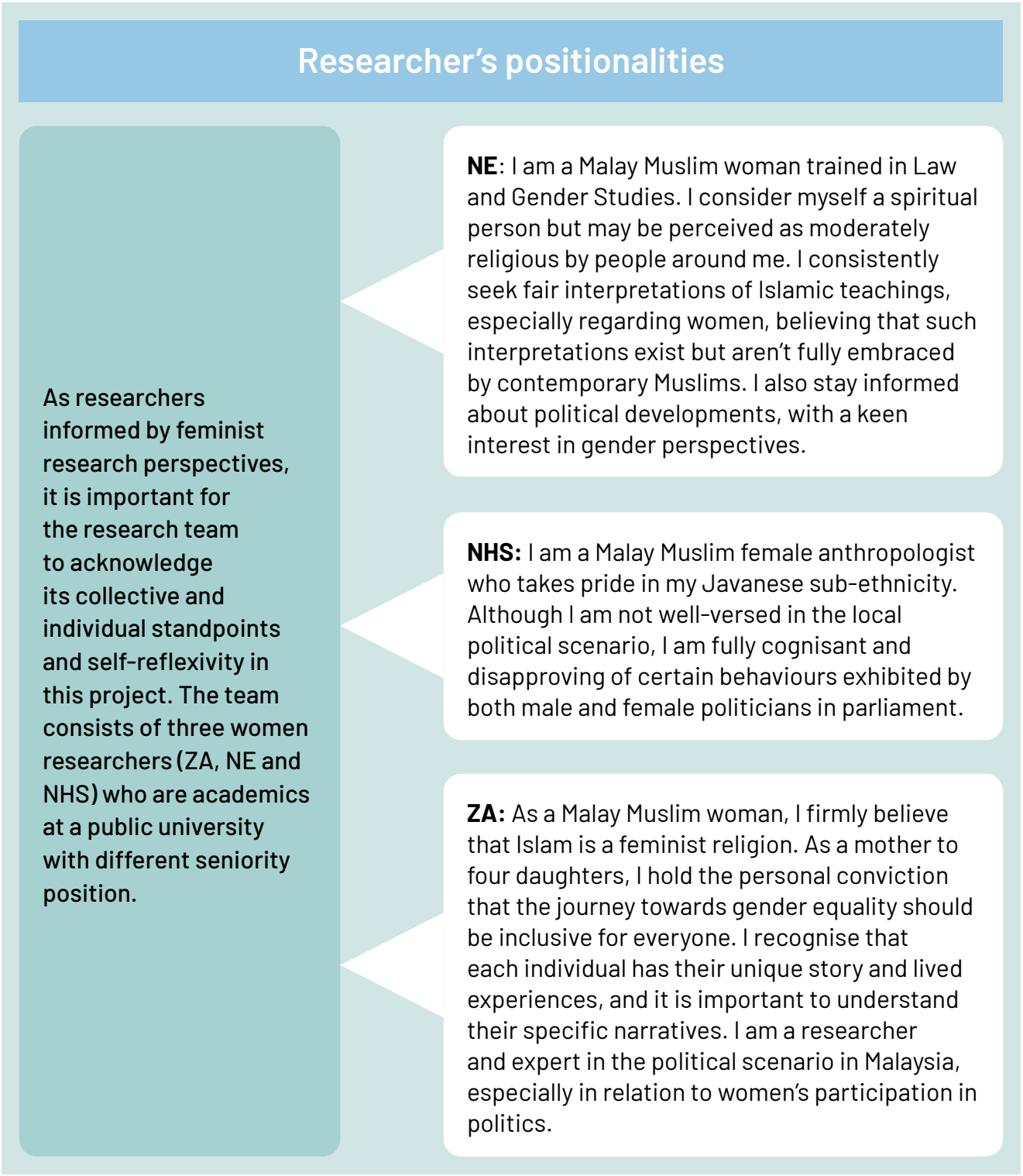
Data analysis and writing

All audio files were transcribed verbatim and translated – a process that proved challenging, as it was difficult to find individuals who were proficient in both the source and translated languages to capture the meaning of the interviews accurately. The transcripts had to be checked back and forth to ensure the correct verbatim transcription. The same applied to translated transcripts. While Happyscribe was used to speed up the process, this application was unable to capture the interviews accurately because the interviewees used a local language that mixes Malay and English, and this could not be detected by the software.

Considerations on the role of gender in the research process

The research team consisted of mostly female researchers (three female and one male), which may have had an impact on data collection and rapport building with male participants, particularly in qualitative research studies of masculinities. Figure 1 summarises the positionality statements of the female researchers.

Figure 1: Positionalities of researchers



Past studies have shown how cross-gender researcher interactions, usually between female researchers and male participants, can challenge and change the research process (Gill and Maclean, 2002; Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997; Pini, 2005; Williams and Heikes, 1993). Female researchers who conduct research within male settings often experience difficulties in gaining access and building rapport with participants, as shown in the work of Gurney (1985) and Pini (2005).

Studies have also revealed that male participants may be less likely to be sexually suggestive or paternalistic with male interviewers, while other studies have found that male participants present themselves differently to researchers of different genders (Williams and Heikes, 1993). A study by Salee and Harris (2011) use the theory of gender performance (West and Zimmerman, 1987) to argue that the research topic (masculinities) and the interviewer's gender increase the participants' awareness among male participants of the ways in which they should identify as men who resist patriarchy. They suggest, therefore, that researchers should be mindful of gender expectations in the research process, work in mixed-gender research teams, and be reflexive about their own gender performance in the research process.

The three female researchers encountered no inappropriate behaviour or mistreatment on the basis of their gender during the interviews or FGDs. There was, however, a minor incident involving a senior male politician who inadvertently used the term 'my dear' while speaking to the youngest researcher. It was only one time, and the researcher did not find it uncomfortable to proceed with the interview. In addition, with other male respondents, the researchers did not face any mistreatment based on their gender. This perhaps was due to the fact that the researchers were older than most respondents, and in Malaysian culture, elders are typically respected.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study given the time constraints and its small sample size. Politicians often grapple with hectic schedules and conflicting priorities, making it difficult to secure their participation and ensure availability for interviews. They were also hesitant to discuss sensitive topics, particularly gender equality, often providing cautious responses or avoiding certain issues.

As noted, Malaysia was gearing up for elections in six states when this project began, which led to some participants dropping out, the need to identify new participants and the postponement of the interviews.

The interview cohort was non-randomised and does not represent a population-targeted sampling. The selection did not encompass male and female politicians from various political parties, and the perspectives presented may not capture the voice, stance, or views of all male and female politicians on topics such as gender equality discourse, feminism, and political masculinities. Many interviewees belong to the ruling party, with only two male politicians from non-government parties and one female politician from an opposition bloc. The research team concludes that discussions with male politicians from opposition parties are important for an understanding of their perceptions on gender equality and political masculinity in Malaysia. Unfortunately, attempts to enlist their participation were not successful.

Male respondents might have presented themselves differently to female researchers, particularly when they were aware before the interview that all female researchers were from KANITA. A few were given a list of questions to be asked prior to the interview either directly or through their personal assistants, as they requested it in advance.

Despite these limitations, the study offers updated insights into the political scenario in Malaysia and provides valuable perspectives on the challenges faced, the factors that influence gender equality pursuits, and the impact of having male allies in politics.

Findings

This section presents the main findings of the research in four sub-sections. The first examines the positioning of male politicians on feminism, their motivations for promoting gender agendas, and their stances on gender equality. The second explores the obstacles that obstruct or hinder their advocacy efforts, while the third investigates the factors that facilitate their support for gender equality. The final sub-section delves into the insights and perspectives of female politicians, journalists, activists, and students regarding male politicians as potential role models, positive influences, and allies in promoting gender equality.

The positioning and motivations of male politicians on feminism

> I don't like to label myself as a feminist or anything specific, but I am very concerned about the issue. Sometimes, feminists give negative labels to people who are seen as just fighting for their own interests. There can also be stereotyping when we talk about feminism – what does it mean, and who qualifies as a feminist?
> Male politician, Chinese, left-wing party

> Oh, I'm not sure how to identify myself but I'm not a cock fest, that's for sure. Do you understand the word cock fest? All about men. I wouldn't call myself a feminist either, just that I am all for women. I don't label myself... but I have no problem [to be labelled feminist]. The label depends on the groups of people, right? If they believe me to be a feminist and feel like I fight for women, gender equality, etc., they will look at all those qualities and tick all the boxes. That seems okay but from another perspective, I also focus on minority issues, tick those boxes, so I'm progressive.
> Male, Malay, centre-left-wing male politician

The perceptions of male politicians in Malaysia span a continuum from positive to negative. At one end of this continuum are the male politicians who have a positive understanding of and response to feminism, gender activism and women's rights issues. At the other end, there were those who oppose feminism, those who have more negative attitudes to it, and those who reject it entirely. The findings of this study are derived mostly from male politicians in the former group. Even within this group, however, there are variations in the motivations, enabling factors and circumstances for their views on feminism, underpinned by their understanding of what feminism is, and they are all cautious about calling themselves 'feminists'.

Of the nine male politicians interviewed, seven were comfortable with the idea of feminism, but chose not to identify themselves as feminists.[2] One said:

> I don't see myself in that way [a feminist] because I believe in and respect feminism. The definition of feminism has become quite complicated, but at its core, the spirit is okay. I feel like I embrace it, and it has also helped shape my perspective of the world.
> Male, Malay Muslim, left-wing party

2 All seven of the politicians who are comfortable with feminism – five of them Malay and two of them ethnically Chinese – were educated in local public institutions of higher learning, where Malay and Islamic activism are pervasive and institutionally supported.

Two of the nine male politicians rejected feminism, perhaps as a result of their (mis)understanding of it, with one saying:

> **The word feminist is considered as 'not manly, bro'. The word feminism is supposed to be used for women not for men. We need to change the term for men too.**
> Male, Malay, left wing political party, attended a gender course

This view echoes a prevailing misreading about feminism in Malaysia (and elsewhere). It is often associated with anti-male sentiments or is perceived as a Western idea that promotes women's superiority. Notably, the two male politicians who rejected 'feminism' as a negative, Western agenda, received their degrees overseas – an experience that seems to have strengthened their misconception about 'feminism' as a Western import. Nevertheless, both of these Malay men still believe that women should have equal access and opportunities to resources, as well as equal rights in certain areas, such as education and work. And one male politician rejected feminism because of what he perceived as its racist origins.

The rejection of feminism by the male politicians interviewed for this study was not related explicitly to electoral concerns. However, according to one feminist activist, their rejection may be linked to fears that aligning to such a label may be disadvantageous to their political careers. Indeed, a number of male politicians stated that the public does not prioritise gender equality issues or women's rights, with one saying:

> **'For them [the public], their priority is more on cost of living, their priorities more on social issues, not much on gender, not much of that'.**
> Male politician

Even among the male politicians who are positive about feminism, there are various reasons for their hesitation to embrace feminism more publicly. Most, for example, feel that 'feminism' is too complex and may not resonate well with the public. In addition, some believe that the term is perceived as being 'for women, by women'. One respondent said:

> **Previously, when I was exposed to American politics, I had a certain affinity for feminism. However, when it comes to the term 'feminist,' its connotation, and the meaning of feminism might be perceived as overly radical and overpowering toward men. Many progressive individuals now hesitate to self-identify as feminists due to concerns about association with radical elements, especially in American contexts. If we revisit the roots of feminism, considering the first wave, I believe the majority of politically progressive individuals, including myself, align with the early versions of feminism.**
> Male, Malay Muslim, local graduate, left wing politician

There are negative connotations associated with the label 'feminist' in Malaysia, where the term is not widely used unless referring to the work of women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Sisters in Islam (SIS). The opposition of SIS to discriminatory laws and practices and its alignment with the concept of Islamic feminism has led to conflicts with religious authorities (Ismail and Hassan, 2021).

Ironically, while male politicians do not call themselves feminist, they do not reject this label if it is imposed on them by others. Such a label can enhance their image as progressive individuals, particularly among less conservative citizens. Finding a balance between progressiveness and

conservatism is a strategy adopted by some male politicians, with moderate progressiveness seen as appealing to constituents. According to one respondent:

> For instance, compared to some, I consider myself more progressive. I'd prefer to be viewed as open-minded in comparison to others. Ultimately, our image is formed by how others perceive us. A staunch feminist might consider me a feminist, whereas a conservative might view me as too liberal, and so on. However, within my own party, I'm generally seen as someone fairly liberal in a positive light. I personally aim to position myself as a more progressive individual compared to the prevailing norms within the party.
> Male, Malay Muslim, left-wing party, advocating for a reformist strand of political Islam

Nevertheless, even politicians who work actively with women's organisations choose not to embrace the feminist label. One male politician who had participated in a women-led campaign still refrains from openly identifying as a feminist or publicising his beliefs, saying:

> It might not be productive for me to say that [I am a feminist]. 'Cause, if I were to say something like that, I will start finding myself [having], to [defend myself]. Okay, then people will start questioning. Okay, which school of thought [are you]? Which school you subscribe to? So, you know [it] defeats the purpose of having me as one of the agents [of change]. I would say I am comfortable to be an agent, the agent of change. I'm willing to support.
> Male, Malay, left-wing male politician

Such views may explain the positionality of male politicians who have a positive response to and understanding of feminism. There are various reasons for their reluctance, including their respect for women's feminist activism and a desire to avoid co-opting the label, as well as the influence of strong societal norms that aim to diminish any activism perceived to challenge patriarchal hierarchies. Given Malaysia's socio-political context, politicians' views on feminism and gender equality – whether negative or positive – may have been predictable.

Women's rights advocates, humanists[3] and allies: from exposure to activism

> Feminism is a big word ***my dear*** [emphasis added]. It entails a very big deep ideological and philosophical thought that I think is quite extreme at one time. So, I do not consider myself as a feminist in that sense: a Western sense of feminism. I do not consider myself a masculinist also. I only consider myself as one who is inspired to see women's rights placed in the right position, within Malaysia context. And I do believe that in that sense I am more of a humanist rather than a feminist or a masculinist.
> Male, Malay Muslim, left-wing male politician

This quote from a relatively senior male politician reflects ongoing narratives on feminism, gender activism and women's rights in Malaysia among a group of male politicians from different sociopolitical backgrounds. It is intriguing to note the use of the phrase 'my dear' by the male politician quoted above when he was interviewed by a female researcher. Numerous scholars claim that gender dynamics can shape the interview process (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2013). While his remark may not have been intentionally malicious, it underscores the power imbalance inherent in relationships between men and women.

3 In the context of Malaysian politics and the participants in this research, the term '**Humanist'** is used to describe politicians who see gender equality as a rights issue for women as for all humans, hence a human-centered approach. Unlike its use in the context of the global North, in the Malaysian context, the term is attached to Islamic interpretation of human rights, social justice and well-being of all.

The majority of participants were more comfortable positioning themselves openly as women's advocates or allies or humanists. Their interest in the issue was motivated by personal experience of witnessing the unequal treatment and injustices faced by women. For example, two male politicians were exposed to these challenges during their university days, which forced them to reflect on their traditional family context and upbringing. One of them said:

> **During my university years, in my era of social activism, we were exposed to different causes, and one of the issues that was championed was International Women's Day. We participated in solidarity with women and understood the issues.**
> Male, Chinese, centrist political party

Another participant became aware of the challenges women face when working with the state government and now understands who is normally impacted by the state policies. Many participants attribute their awareness to interaction, sometimes in the form of indirect mentorship, with notable female politicians, as well as their engagement or involvement with civil society organisations (CSOs) that promote women's rights and human rights. These CSOs are often led by women.

Male politicians in this category recognise the limited access, opportunities and rights of women in society and express a belief in equal rights, equal opportunities and equal treatment. The provision of women-friendly policies and programmes is a significant aspect of their work to empower women. One participant asserted:

> **For me, what's important is whether you are genuinely working towards changing and improving women's livelihoods, their social status, and defending their rights. I think the main category I would like to place myself in is one that cares about marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, and I want to help empower them to protect their rights.**
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party and a state legislature representative

Another factor in their support for the gender equality agenda is a profound sense of injustice and the unfairness of disparities and discriminatory practices. This is linked to their framing of these issues through social justice and rights discourse. Some are committed to the elimination of systemic imbalances and aim to ensure everyone, regardless of their gender, has equal access and opportunities across various aspects of life, and particularly in politics.

A seasoned male politician felt strongly that women's rights are human rights, and that every party should work to fulfil them, saying:

> **I would take that stand that as a human I would respect them [women] as I respect myself as a male. They have rights, they should be given those rights, and it's not just about women demanding their rights. It's about the whole society recognising those rights because it's a demand not only specific to women but a demand from society that requires women to be honoured.**
> Male, Malay Muslim, left-wing party

Another incorporates gender equality into his everyday activities:

> **As an example, being a state assemblyman, I spend most of my time outside. My wife complains; she feels like she shares her husband with all the voters. However, when it comes to focusing on the family, I make adjustments. I dedicate time to my family from 5pm to 8pm daily, despite being extremely busy. It's crucial to have dinner with my wife and family without any appointments for at least three hours a day. If I have to work overnight**

> after 8pm, I don't mind. We need to strike a balance and make sacrifices to manage our political life and family because it's crucial!
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party

Overall, three types of relationships to feminisms and th gender equality agenda emerged from interviews with male politicians, as follows.

- **Protectionists.** These male politicians see their role as supporting and advocating for women's rights and the women's agenda as part of their responsibility as men with political positions and as part of human rights. They believe that their position gives them a responsibility to help and protect women. While they empathise with women who experience injustice and inequality, they do not persuade other male colleagues to join the cause as they believe everyone should realise their responsibility and their task.

- **Political strategists.** These are men who not only support but also understand the discourse on the gender equality agenda. They lead initiatives related to this agenda because they recognise the importance of women's support for their political survival. While their initiatives stem from their own understanding of the need to ensure more access and opportunities for women in politics and society, they also appeal to women who are known as party loyalists. These men also acknowledge the need to be flexible in wooing voters, with one saying, 'politicians have to wear different hats'.

- **Committed allies.** These politicians actively promote gender equality and advocate for systematic change, not only for their party's benefit but also for society as a whole. They claim that they are trying to impress women voters and are driven by their own interest in social norm change and ending the systemic oppression of women.

These three categories are not rigid or exclusive. Their outlooks may be shaped by diverse social and political backgrounds that span various political ideologies. However, despite these differences, they may have common motivations that are rooted in their personal experiences and their comprehension of gender equality and women's agendas. While such foundations position them as agents of change in politics, their roles adapt to different circumstances and the need to express their support. There is an overall absence of continuous, cooperative endeavours among male politicians. This is attributed, primarily, to the uncertain commitment of their own political parties to gender-related agendas.

The role of Islam: from protectionism to a rejection of Western values

Religious interpretation plays a crucial role in politicians' stand on feminism and gender equality. One male politician who supports women's rights draws a red line in terms of respecting Sharia, saying:

> As long as it [women's equality] doesn't contradict the Sharia, as long as it doesn't contradict our laws, then we must fight for it as our responsibility as Malaysian citizens.
> Male, Malay Muslim, left wing party

He emphasises the crucial role of women and demonstrates that a Muslim man can champion gender equality and women's rights causes while maintaining a strong connection to Islam. Similarly, a young male politician, who has been exposed to Muslim women in leadership roles and has experienced more egalitarian decision-making within his family, adopts a social construction in which Islam does not run counter to feminism; instead it serves as a motivating and morally compelling factor that propels politicians to advocate for gender equality.

Others, however, saw the fight for gender equality as conflicting with the religious and societal values of Malaysia and, therefore, rejected the concept. One participant argued the struggle for gender equality means women are pushing for complete parity, which is unnatural in the Islamic context, saying:

> **I think women have a significant role in implementing or influencing the aspects I am advocating for [Islamic Justice]. However, it doesn't extend to the point of advocating for gender equality, which I am somewhat sceptical about and don't fully agree with. While I acknowledge the importance of women, I'm not inclined to push for complete equality from a Western perspective or the United Nations' conventions... I don't want to be included as a women's right warrior.**
> Male, Malay Muslim, activist turned politician

In fact, he is rejecting the idea of feminism because he feels that the West has a hidden agenda in promoting equality, which conflicts with his view of Islam, which while it teaches respect for women and their rights, sees women and men as different. He believes that women in Malaysia are not discriminated against because they hold prominent positions such as ministers, governors and CEOs.

The demonisation of feminism as a Western influence is nothing new in Malaysia, and the lack of open discourse about the concept in public fora means that misconceptions about it will persist, particularly among more conservative citizens and leaders. In addition, the knowledge base on gender studies and concepts, including feminism, is not well developed in the public university curriculum in Malaysia, which hampers public exposure to the ideas.

Some politicians use a protectionist lens to frame their role as advocates for women's rights, seeing this as appropriate for an Islamic society, and feel obliged to speak out for women whose rights are ignored by male leaders. For example, one participant claims he aims to protect women and marginalised single mothers and address issues that affect women, such as sexual harassment. Two participants acknowledged the significant role of women in society and the need for more women at decision making levels. Again, they position women's issues within a justice and human rights framework in the context of Malaysia as an Islamic country.

The stance of one Malay Muslim politician is guided by his comprehension of Islam's position on the SDGs. There is a requirement in Malaysia to enact legislation that safeguards women's rights, as exemplified by the Sexual Harassment Act. But he feels that Islam, as a religion that guides his worldview, supports women's rights but not in the same way as seen in the global (i.e. Western) agenda.

Finally, ethnicity is an intersecting factor for some politicians. The strongest opponents to feminism are known for their activisms for the privileges and rights of Malay Muslims. Their reservations about feminism stem from concerns about the perceived growing influence of other ethnic groups and the belief that feminism and gender equality pose a threat to Malay Muslim norms. Given the limited number of respondents from other ethnicities in this study, it is not possible to determine whether politicians from other ethnicities have different views.

Understanding gender equality

> **Women and men should be treated equally. No one should be privileged over others. So, they should be treated equally in society, including in their social status, work, and contributions.**
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party

Only a few politicians have a good understanding of feminism, women's rights, gender equality and gender discrimination. Although the men interviewed were selected for their views on and responses to women's advocacy, their internalisation of the relevant concepts is varied and even, in some cases, changed during the interviews. They are, in general, able to identify areas in women's lives, particularly in the political sphere, where women face discrimination. Yet this awareness does not necessarily lead to action to improve this situation.

According to the male politicians interviewed, Malaysian political parties do not discuss gender equality. Party leaders tend to prioritise parliamentary discussions on issues that are seen as more important, such as the economy, infrastructure, education and health, often without any gender lens. Women's issues tend to fall within the purview of women parliamentarians as part of the so-called 'women's agenda'. In parliamentary settings, these concerns are usually directed to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD).

Some males in politics admitted that politicians in Malaysia openly display 'toxic masculinity' by making derogatory and sexual remarks about women, as described earlier in this report. Despite many objections by female politicians about sexism and harassment, there has been no united reaction from male MPs, even from those who are considered to be women's rights advocates and allies. As a result, such demeaning behaviour has been normalised, and the number of sexist jokes directed at female politicians is increasing.

In private, however, men are able to criticise male peers for disrespecting women. A former student activist, who is now a young Deputy Minister, claims that while male politicians seldom speak out about this in Parliament, they do address derogatory remarks made by other men, often those from different political parties or coalitions. An informal code among politicians regarding behaviour in Parliament means that women do not address those remarks in order to avoid bruising men's egos.

While such behaviour is acknowledged to be inappropriate, it is seen as part of the parliamentary interaction that adds 'cheerfulness' to the environment. The male politicians interviewed imply that it is easier for men to promote and support a women's agenda and issues in politics, as they have the privilege and space to do so. As such, they openly acknowledge women's struggle and shared their efforts to foster the women's agenda. However, their apparent readiness and to promote gender equality, and their resources to do so, should be treated with some caution.

Well-intended efforts to support women sometimes reinforce existing power dynamics. Two male politicians are convinced that their efforts to include women in leadership position will empower women and expand their presence in politics. They also believe that women should have the capability to empower themselves. This suggests that women need to step up and utilise the space created for them by men and prove that they are capable of leading. This illustrates the way in which male politicians negotiate spaces that allow them to exercise their gender equality politics most effectively within their own political party or coalition structures. At the same time, it also indicates that these parties are primarily masculine cultures.

Obstacles to the engagement of male politicians in gender equality efforts

This section highlights the factors that hinder or facilitate male allyship in politics. The obstacles to the engagement of male politicians in gender equality efforts include biased social norms, opposition, and a lack of demand from wider society for gender equality. In addition, male politicians are hindered by a lack of support or commitment from other stakeholders and a lack of trust in their ability to undertake gender work. The enabling factors that facilitate their efforts to advance the gender equality agenda include their own male privilege, stated party ideologies, and international influences on social norms.

Social norms, opposition and a lack of demand

Male politicians who support gender equality in Malaysia may experience backlash and resistance from those who perceive such efforts as a threat to Islamic values and cultural norms. For example, during his tenure in the government, one experienced politician was labelled in a negative way as someone who promotes LGBTQI+ people because of his actions to address the discrimination faced by this group. While he was not accused of being gay himself, he was criticised for promoting liberalism on this issue, which, for the majority of the Muslim community, goes against Islamic teachings. His work on anti-discrimination initiatives aimed to uphold his responsibilities as a politician to treat all of his constituents equally, rather than his own personal views on this matter:

> **Mention LGBT and immediately people react with insults and curses. They can't differentiate who is advocating and who has issues themselves. They cannot differentiate. For me, this is a very dangerous mind-set among Malaysians, especially among Malays who think they are more Islamic than others. It's very dangerous because they sweep everyone into the same category, justifying hostility, hatred, and anything else which is wrong, to the point of disrespecting the law and not respecting the realities of society and so on.**
> Male, Malay, left-wing party

The biggest challenge for male politicians who promote gender equality is opposition from the Malay community, based on the interpretation of religious texts that see gender equality as diluting Islam – an issue that was not mentioned by ethnic Chinese male politicians. As a seasoned politician from a religious family asserts, even if politicians' personal beliefs favour women's rights, others may challenge this view:

> **I have always been guided from the very beginning especially by what Islam commands… Women's rights in Islam are relevant and they remain so in the effort to dignify women and free them from oppression in the male-dominated world, and, more importantly, to consider them not as commodities that can be transferred, but as beings with rights.**
> Male, Malay, senior male politician from a political party that promotes a reformist strand of political Islam

Another concern about societal acceptance of gender equality work was expressed as a lack of demand from the grassroots. Discourse on the need to appoint more women, for example, does not reach the grass roots or local communities where there are few female role models for political leadership. One politician highlighted the need to build the bottom-up involvement of women:

> **So, the challenge sometimes lies in how we can raise awareness among women. The bottom-up process is harder than top-down because I want women to be inspired. I want them to actively participate. I want women to be vocal about their issues. I can say all that, but on the ground, people might not think it's important for them.**
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party

Nevertheless, the main concern of male politicians is not the loss of conservative votes, but people's poor understanding of gender issues. Some are prepared to overlook potential rejection by voters in their efforts to empower and support gender agendas. At the same time, they also fail to emphasise the role of other male politicians in this pursuit.

The gap between the representation of men and women in politics results in the muted and diminished importance of women's voices and this, in turn, hampers demand for their greater representation. One male politician alleged that Malaysian women have a cultural inclination to avoid confrontation, unlike their male counterparts:

> **They [women] tend to be very calm. They don't want to get involved in conflicts. They consistently take a neutral stance, always trying to maintain harmony. They refrain from taking sides, and they avoid contributing to escalating conflicts. Instead, they contribute to de-escalating situations, which is good in my view.**
> Male, Malay, left-wing party, a senior politician

While he sees this as a positive trait, it contributes to the prevalence of masculine behaviours and domination in politics.

Lack of buy-in from other stakeholders

Another obstacle to gender equality stems from entrenched societal and personal beliefs that are embedded within Malaysia's political culture and practices, often based on preconceived and inaccurate assumptions. For example, a male government officer claimed that negative remarks from those who do not believe in gender equality often portray a lack of empathy and understanding of the broader implications of this agenda. According to him, many government servants fail to comprehend that gender equality encapsulates all aspects of their work and life, particularly in their responsibilities as government officers to ensure unbiased policymaking and implementation that benefits every segment of society. He also noted the views of other government officers who feel that too much emphasis has been placed on gender issues and that is it not necessary to continuously discuss them:

> **You [referring to himself] are always talking about women. What's the big deal about women? Don't use it all the time, what's the point? If you like pink so much, go ahead, I'll use pink.**
> Male government officer

The officer sees this attitude as a sign that the other government officers do not recognise the importance of gender equality, and that most of them refuse to understand or learn about the gender agenda. Such perspectives fail to recognise that gender equality is not an isolated agenda intended for a specific group; rather, it is a comprehensive agenda that should be addressed by society as a whole.

Male politicians however, did not say that they could not act on a gender agenda because they felt alone or without support. Instead, they rely on their own capacities, feeling not only a responsibility to act, but a belief that they can do it. This indicates that the obstacle is not because these male politicians are under pressure, but because they are working solo, and as a result, the impact on gender equality efforts does not appeal to all politicians.

Some of the new male politicians, including those who are in their first political positions or just starting their political careers, are reluctant to address women issues because they do not want to interfere in the affairs of other leaders. They do not want to be seen to challenge the status quo of existing political norms and practices, including the political masculinity seen in the over-representation of men in leadership positions. While participants' engagement with the gender equality discourse may arise from their genuine concern about women's well-being rather than the pursuit of their personal interests, doing so in isolation sustains and perpetuates male dominance.

Distrust of men in gender work

A major obstacle faced by male politicians advocating for gender issues is the perception that gender equality is a woman's struggle. They may also face scepticism from female activists. Malaysia's feminist movement has been led primarily by women for many decades, and societal norms and stereotypes continue to link this cause to women. As a result, while men express interest in participating in the movement, their actions are met with scepticism, particularly from women politicians and activists and may be misunderstood as a manipulative strategy to gain popularity.

Male politicians may not fully grasp that their attempts to advocate for women's rights are not always well-received. While the male politicians in this study, particularly those who promote gender equality, may not mention this distrust, it is pointed out by female politicians and activists. This suggests a structural disconnect between the advocacy of male politicians and the expectations and perceptions of female counterparts in the feminist sphere. This structural misalignment could hinder the effectiveness of collaborative efforts towards gender equality in the political arena. One female journalist, for example, reflected on efforts by MUDA's president to field more than 50% of female candidates in by-state election in 2023, saying:

> There's no people from MUDA with him. He's the only guy. But he gets an outsized voice in coverage and crowd because he creates all this noise about himself. Otherwise, he would be irrelevant. I understand he's doing it because of his survival. He's the only guy... So, he's not altruistic. He's a politician.
> Female journalist

Most of the students in six focus group discussions named this same president as a male ally and supporter of gender equality, with all the male activists naming him as a figure who fights for gender equality in Malaysia. One male Chinese activist said:

> I think of all the people I can name on the top of my head, these are Syed Saddiq and Tony Phua, the top two that come to the top of the list.
> Male Chinese activist

Another female politician emphasised:

> As a strong advocate for women's rights and advocating for more women candidates in the elections, we are fortunate to have our secretary general who strongly believes in women's rights as well. I believe that the president himself, rather than calling it populist, genuinely believes in it. That's why I think he, even before we pushed it further, took the initiative himself without any resistance from us. He doesn't need much convincing on why we need more women. So, I don't view his action as a populist move.
> Female politician

Despite the challenges of getting male politicians' support, and some scepticism about their motives, the female politicians interviewed also believe that educating and engaging male politicians in gender equality is vital for gender agendas. These agendas, should, they say, be promoted and championed by men as well as women.

> Still, we can see that women's rights, women's agenda, is still done by women because only women understand women. This is the reason why we want the fight for gender equality, it's not only a women thing. It can be a men's thing as well. So, you work on it, not that you only support it. You work in promoting, in driving gender equality rather than [saying] this is the women's thing.
> Female politician, left-wing party

They argue that male parliamentarians and political leaders have the potential to become strategic allies and powerful advocates for gender equality, and eventually to make changes, especially due to their control of political parties. However, female politicians and activists also believe that women in general would not see a male leader as representing their lived realities. This aligns with the views of one male politician who refuses to label himself as a feminist. While he supports gender equality and the gender agenda through his own capacities, he said:

> I don't have to be the one to go out and preach, to preach in a way I'm not comfortable with. I'm not comfortable going out and starting to preach like a real feminist out there.
> Male politician

Enabling factors for the work of male politicians on gender equality

While some male politicians are making efforts to empower women in politics, there are few enabling factors to inspire more men to advocate for gender equality. While students and activists identified potential enablers, these remain largely unrecognised by the male politicians themselves. The literature, too, suggests various areas that could foster change in gender politics, but the male political discourse appears to overlook them. This highlights a critical gap in strategic thinking within male political circles on the implementation of measures that could stimulate meaningful change towards gender equality.

Male privilege and political power

Male privilege, constructed from patriarchal norms and enjoyed by men, puts male politicians in a position to either collectively embrace or oppose patriarchy. This is particularly evident in the positions occupied by the male politicians in this study. As one noted:

> I had to appoint a Women's Bureau Chief even though I didn't really need one. Why have a Women's Bureau? Even though [the party] consists of both men and women, I had to establish a Women's Bureau so that women who want to join [the party] can do so through the Women's Bureau.
> Male politician, left-wing party

These men have power, influence and authority, and recognise this position and their ability to act upon it. However, it is also noteworthy that they use the language of male privilege when arguing that women need to step up to be recognised and acknowledged as leaders. As with the politician quoted above who worked with his party's existing structure to create a bigger space for women within its leadership, their narratives are about them giving women a space to shine. One state leader, for example, claimed:

> So, I can only appoint one woman as the chairwoman of JPWK. For me, that is not enough. Therefore, I changed the chairman of MPKK to a woman, a position previously held by a man. I also changed the secretary of MPKK to a woman. After training for three years in JPWK, I transferred them to become chairwomen of MPKKK as Village Headwomen. I appointed many Chiefs of villages. Not only Chinese, but we also appointed Indians and Malays as chairmen and secretaries for the MPKK. My personal assistant is also a woman. For me, I give them an equal chance.
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party

He further asserts:

> I am the one who supports them [women]. I sponsor them for state events. I find a venue for them.
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party

Another said:

> We provided every opportunity for them [women], I gave speeches where I emphasised the need for them to step forward, lead, and stand out. I created spaces and encouraged them.
> Male, Chinese, left-wing party

The male politicians also believe that by fostering a culture of respect and equality, male allies can contribute to a more inclusive political environment.

Party ideology

The male allies interviewed for this study are affiliated with political parties that are part of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, which is perceived as more progressive and liberal on gender-related issues. The cultures of their political parties are also seen as more conducive for the discourse of gender equality. During GE14, the PH manifesto emphasised gender-related content, such as the need for gender quotas. However, efforts by male leaders to promote gender issues within individual parties of the coalition declined in visibility after 2020. Despite party values that favour gender equality, their existing structures slow down the incorporation of the gender agenda. A male leader from one of the coalition parties said that as a party that projects itself as more progressive and inclusive, it should have been able to do more for this agenda. This illustrates that male politicians are also negotiating spaces that allow them to exercise their gender equality politics most effectively, which is within political party structures of the same coalition.

International influences on social norms

Some focus group respondents mentioned the influence of international discourses and their potential impact on wider societal norms in Malaysia, as well as on expectations of women in politics. This could, in turn, contribute to changes in politicians' views of voters and their interest in equality. For example, a student mentioned the American politician Nancy Pelosi, saying:

> I think she is a cool leader and has expertise to lead her party. I think our male and female politicians should learn from her attitude and her conflict resolution skills. There is something that I really consider. How she deals with conflict...
> Male, FGD participant

While international influence on the perspectives of the focus group respondents could be an enabler in the case of Malaysia, there is little engagement with global gender discourse among the politicians. Only one male politician linked international discourse on gender issues with his internalisation of gender equality. The others did not refer to documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), nor did they relate the importance of gender agenda to the context of Malaysia as a global player.

The impact of male allies

The involvement of men in politics as gender equality allies and their actions on gender-related matters can have repercussions on perceptions on politics and gender norms. The following findings, based on interviews with female politicians, activists and students, demonstrate, however, that while male politicians have the potential to become role models and positive influencers, their influence has been limited to date.

Male allies: some support, but insufficient action

All female politicians interviewed made it clear that having male allies is a critical step for lasting impact on the women's agenda. However, they argue that there is a lack of real male allies and champions, and that they are a 'rare species'. One interviewee took some time to identify any male politicians who champion gender equality or who really speak about women's rights. She concluded:

> **There's no male politician that pops up because I don't think they are visible enough.**
> Female politician, Malay, left-wing party

But how many male politicians would be willing to relinquish their position to give way to women? As one female politician noted:

> **...they need to have the political will. It's as simple as that; it's about the political will. And it will be very tough because, as decision-makers, it is natural for them. Naturally, their first response is to protect their own interests.**
> Senior female politician

In general, women in politics recognise that male political allies exist and that they give opportunities to female leaders in party leadership committees/groups. The female politicians expressed gratitude for the encouragement they receive, which motivates them to continue to strive for greater gender inclusivity within their parties. Their male leaders in political parties are willing to listen to their demands, provide guidance and mentorship, and endorse the call for at least 30% representation of women at decision-making levels. One example of male allyship and support relates to action on stateless children. As a female politician highlighted:

> **I asked them [men in the party] about the issue of stateless children. It's not a popular or eye-catching agenda for people. It usually doesn't translate into votes. Especially because this is my passion and involves children. So, essentially, it doesn't garner votes. I mean, are they ready to support me if I want to consistently emphasise this issue, and would they stand behind me in the process? They said yes.**
> Female, left-wing leader

Another female politician said:

> **There are leaders whom we can discuss and negotiate with. For instance, the President, we have meetings with the President... Even in the meeting, there is a Deputy President who supports us. The top leadership has no problem appointing women as long as the candidates are of high calibre and from the grassroots.**
> Female, right-wing political leader

Female politicians feel, however, that male politicians who are allies or supporters are not taking clear action to mobilise efforts towards 'gender equality' more broadly. They attribute this inaction, in part, to a lack of understanding of what gender equality means and suggest that a gender lens is needed to educate their male counterparts and other female leaders on its importance. As noted in the obstacles mentioned earlier, the female politicians' perception of male allies' actions to champion gender equality suggests a lack of genuine belief. They appear to expect more concrete action from male allies to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality. One acknowledges that while it is important to include men in the struggle for gender equality, women themselves should take an active role and be at the forefront of the cause, stating:

> **In my party, when we began, we had women politicians who were decision-makers in the party, and we felt the difference whenever there was an alternation in leadership positions between men and women. We noticed the differences in the types of decision-making when there were more women sitting in the bureau compared to when there were fewer. Hence, I believe we need more women involved in top decision-making roles.**
> Female politician, left-wing party

Female politicians highlighted the challenge of bringing men on board and the need for substantial bargaining with them. In other words, female politicians do not find it easy to work with male allies, who still require convincing. This bargaining could see female politicians adhering to traditional gender roles, accepting limitations on their personal freedom, or even perpetuating stereotypes, all to gain some level of social acceptance, protection or opportunities within Malaysia's political system. They also mentioned the need for sustained dialogue with male leaders to negotiate for increased representation for women within the political party's structure and during elections. One interviewee explained:

> **How to get them to listen? First, they must listen and understand, and how you make them understand? You have to make them, show them how it also affects them [the men]. When I talk about childcare, I also say, see, if your wife has to juggle between childcare and work, she will be very stressed. When she is stressed, she's not going to be pleasant, right? When she is not pleasant, you will also be affected by it, right. It [gender equality] is for [the benefit] of the family, baby and the father as well. So, the argument is about we are protecting you, man (laughing).**
> Female, Malay, left-wing party, senior politician

In addition, female politicians find that getting more support from male politicians is a formidable challenge as it could jeopardize the allocation of resources secured by male politicians. Understandably, male politicians wish to protect their own interests, including their resources. As one female politician said:

> **...they need to have the political will. It's as simple as that. It's about the political will. And it will be very tough because, as decision-makers, it is natural for them. Naturally, their first response is to protect their own interests. Therefore, if you ask them to, for example, set a 30% quota for women, internal candidates, that means how many male candidates will be affected. It's a very real issue.**
> Senior female politician, Chinese, centrist party

A female politician from MUDA, a new and youth-centric political party, stated that her party, led by a man, strives to provide greater space and opportunities for the appointment and election of women as leaders. One of the steps taken was to nominate more than 50% of women candidates in the state by-elections in June 2023, with only the woman-led Parti Bangsa Malaysia promoting a higher number

of women candidates. Although the action taken by the President of this new party has been lauded by some citizens, others are sceptical and perceive it as a way to gain more popularity.

Female politicians, male and female activists and students alike acknowledge that male allies can contribute to changes in the traditional norms in politics. However, they feel that the men are not yet part of the conversation and, as a result, even male champions and allies are not contributing to collective feminist and women-led efforts, as a young female politician highlighted:

> **This kind of conversation [about male political allies] is also not a conversation out there. This type of conversation needs to be out there... For example, in a party weekly meeting, do they speak, does anyone ask these kind of questions?**
> Young female politician

Expressing her disappointment, a seasoned female politician claimed that gender equality is never part of men's agenda because it does not benefit them. They only understand it as a women's issue that should be addressed by women:

> **Once you say gender equality, a very common reaction is, 'you are a woman', '[and you are] a man'. We are simply different. And then also a little bit further [different advantages], you would say, this is what God made human beings different. Women are supposed to do this work. You are meant to take care of children, to reproduce, and take care of family. It's just like now, you quote it, as your army go in front, they have people at the back. Women are at the back.**
> Female, Chinese, centrist party

While female activists are particularly sceptical about the role of male politicians as agents of change, male activists are more positive about their potential. The former feel that men are protecting the status quo and not doing enough to support women in politics. The latter can easily identify a few male politicians who they perceive as friendly towards the women's agenda and believe this is a positive step towards gender equality. With some variations, this was a common finding that emerged from all six focus groups:

> **I think that as a politician, when they promote gender equality or women's rights, it's a good thing because it brings that agenda to the public. Even if they have other intentions, like winning elections or something, it has an effect in that the agenda or issue is brought to the public so that everyone knows, reads, and recognises the issue. I mean, no matter what the motivation is, it's still a good thing.**
> Female, Malay, left-wing party

According to respondents across various categories (including students, male and female politicians, male and female activists), the prevalence of harmful masculinity in Parliament and in public discourse contributes to and perpetuates a political culture that favours men. The students, for example, observed a tendency among men to exhibit aggression, hostility and dominance in parliamentary settings, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women.

Notably, while these students criticise the typical conduct of male politicians in parliamentary and political settings, they refrain from characterising it as an inherent aspect of societal expectations and norms. Instead, they attribute such behaviour to the actions of individual politicians, with some even considering such behaviour as common among politicians from specific regions. While these students may personally disagree with such behaviour, they do not deny its influence on other people in society.

While female politicians interviewed found it difficult to identify men whom they saw as 'good' allies or advocates, many still have a strong faith that men can have an impact as influential decision-makers and that partnering with such male politicians could be a 'game changer'. This is because they believe that women's issues cannot be advanced solely by women, while arguing that male counterparts should champion the women's agenda for their political survival.

Participants felt that engaging with male politicians should not side-line women. As a female activist cautions, the whole conversation about a women's agenda should not be dominated by men and there is a real danger this could happen, particularly in relation to high levels of protectionism and machismo, particularly among men who do not fully understand gender equality and feminism. She argues:

> **While politicians, both men and women, represent their constituents and serve the interests of all citizens, it's essential to acknowledge that when discussing women's issues, the voices and stories of women should take the lead. Men can offer support and solidarity, but there is a need for women to lead the charge for gender equality.**
> Female activist

Evidently, male politicians are still perceived as having only a limited influence on the alteration of gender norms, particularly within the political sphere. The narratives shared by male and female politicians in this study do not suggest that this perception arises because men fail to recognise the personal impact of gender equality efforts or fear that support for women might diminish their current standing or opportunities with their constituents. In addition, their narratives do not appear to be driven by a desire to impress citizens; rather, they stem from a genuine internalisation that underscores the need to advocate for women. Yet, the majority are not seen as translating this internalisation into concrete action.

Role models and father figures

While masculinities were not in the centre of male politicians' understanding of their role as allies, humanists and advocates, their gendered performances have a direct and indirect effect on people because they are often in the public eye. A male activist claimed that young people imitate politicians who normalise certain behaviours, saying:

> **If we show younger audiences what happens in Parliament to be so toxic, then they are likely to emulate the same thing… if we maintain a lot of corrupt practices in economics, for example, or in the way we deal with government offices, the way we deal with positions of leadership…, then we tend to associate manhood with being with these values.**
> Male, Malay, left-wing party

Most female students who participated in this study regard female politicians as their role models, recognising their visibility as national leaders. Their admiration for male politicians is also rooted in their prominence, and these female students are aware of the male politicians' reputation as advocates for women's issues. The female students in one of the FGDs concluded that politicians who are brave enough to speak out on women's issues are smart and brilliant, and they feel that their interests are represented by these male allies. The gender performance of these male politicians involves challenging traditional gender norms and expectations by actively supporting gender agendas and advocating for women – behaviour that is appealing to female students.

The majority of the students were dismayed when shown an article about male politicians making derogatory remarks toward female politicians, with the female students showing a strong disgust. While the male students were seen smiling and laughing a little, they also disapproved of such behaviour. The conduct of these male politicians can be seen as a typical performance of traditional masculinity, where they assert dominance and power over women by demeaning or objectifying them. By making light of sexist attitudes (treated as jokes by some audiences), the male politicians perform a version of masculinity that values both power and the subordination of women. It may be perceived as harmless or humorous by male politicians, but female students and other individuals may interpret it as inappropriate and offensive. These different perceptions highlight the way in which gender performance shapes understanding of what is seen as acceptable behaviour in politics, based on traditional gender norms.

A significant number of the male students who participated in this study are inspired by male politicians whom they view as providing tangible examples of responsible and charismatic leadership and who are actively engaged in decision-making, governance and public service. These students look at these male figures as role models who have a clear vision, dedication and commitment. Notably, some of their male role models are young, good-looking male politicians who are perceived as champions of gender equality and women friendly. In addition, support for the advancement of women in Malaysia was seen as a desirable quality for male politicians by both male and female students. Two of them shared their views on male politicians:

> He is doing a lot of things for young generations. He is more relatable in a youngster's mind-set. He also voices up issues related to women. I do not have any female politician that I favour...
> Male student, focus group participant

> I look up to him as a politician because we can see how he works in terms of gender equality through social media. It can be seen clearly on how he serves Pandan Jaya's society [a district in Malaysia]. He even wants to open a centre for widows to find their life partner. This is something interesting because not all male politicians can come up with the idea...
> Male student, focus group participant

One prominent male politician mentioned in several FGDs was MP Syed Saddiq, who is known for his regular communication on social media and his efforts to drive societal changes. Two young female politicians, MP Fadhlina Sidek and former MP Nurul Izzah Anwar, were also cited as embodying leadership qualities by both male and female students.

Gender equality allies amongst male politicians are also perceived to be collaborating with female politicians in delivering their organisations' objectives (e.g., ministry and political party), as well as support for women's programmes, activities and facilities.

Finally, students identify with leaders who are perceived as approachable and who have an image linked to 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood':

> To me, a politician who are taking care of women rights is the former Prime Minister. He said government need to prioritise and honour women. I don't really know about this, but that's what I heard. And his character is like a father. I can see he got affections, values and tolerance within himself...
> Male student, focus group participant

The students mentioned paternal titles used by two former Prime Ministers during the Covid-19 pandemics, which made them feel close to these leaders. These included titles like 'Abah' or 'father' by the 8th Prime Minister, 'Pak Long' (Uncle) for the Senior Minister (who later was appointed as the 9th Prime Minister), and 'Pak Ngah' (Second Uncle) for the Director-General of Health. Such titles represent the concept of the Malaysian family that was promoted by the government at that time.

While this may be seen as friendly and culturally relevant, it also reinforces masculine influence in politics, with paternal titles openly used only by male leaders. This loads the fatherly figure with authority and power and requires the subordination of others who must show respect, whether to the head of a family or the country. This is distinct from the maternal image often associated with female leaders, which tends to be nurturing and caring.

Paternalism reinforces a culture that uplifts men as leaders in any position and fortifies male power in elusive ways. To appeal to conservative voters, including young people, male politicians may also engage in gender performative displays of traditional family values and patriarchal norms, accentuating their roles as fathers and husbands and as the protectors of family values. By playing this role, male politicians affirm their power and control over others, perpetuating hierarchical gender dynamics where men hold positions of authority and women are subordinate.

The FGDs with students revealed that the key differences in views of male politicians were based on the students' own understanding of feminism and gender equality. While male participants tended to be more conservative or have a traditional gender roles perspective, the female students articulated their opinions clearly, based on the appropriate terms, concepts, or perspectives. Female students were more likely to view male allies positively for their work than the activists and female politicians whose feminist consciousness made them more critical of male politicians for not meeting their expectations.

Another differentiating factor among students was their educational background or field of study. Those who were studying social sciences or humanities were more assertive in their answers to the research questions about the impact of male politicians. Those from non-social sciences backgrounds found it more difficult to express their views due to a lack of knowledge about the concepts or the appropriate terms to be used when articulating their opinions.

A new generation of male politicians

A new generation of male politicians perceived as women-friendly by female students taking part in the focus groups stands out as a significant enabling factor for male allyship. Despite lingering suspicions, there is optimism that these politicians can further champion the gender equality agenda. The presence of more male politicians who demonstrate empathy for women's rights acts as a positive catalyst, attracting attention and support from the younger generation, particularly young men. This dynamic fosters awareness of the agenda and encourages the emergence of new male allies, as emphasised by a female politician.

The impact of male allies is underscored by most students in the six FGDs, who identify several young male politicians as notably receptive to the gender equality agenda – a sentiment echoed by other male activists. Notably, all male politicians aged between 31 and 36 expressed their willingness to expand opportunities for women in politics and work persistently to advance the gender agenda, despite acknowledging the challenges. Some also admitted the need to practice equal gender norms.

> Believe it or not, it becomes a subconscious mind-set without our awareness that the practice [not side-lining women] itself will provide an advantage... So, it becomes a practice, a practice that we are not aware of, but like some of us are already accustomed to it, the young people, we are accustomed to it, there must be women, there must be programmes.
> Male politician, Malay, left-wing party

In addition, female politicians acknowledge the efforts of male politicians to promote gender equality when recommending them for research interviews, given their advocacy for women's agendas. This is of particular relevance when advocating for measures such as a 30% quota for women's participation in Parliament and decision-making processes. It is not seen, therefore, as being as simple as saying, *'Men can do it, so women can too'*, because their circumstances are not equal.

The narratives shared by the male politicians in this study suggest they engage in a spectrum of actions regarding gender relations. At one end of this spectrum, some male politicians are active advocates for policies that promote gender equality and women's rights, such as ensuring equally accessible spaces for women in mosques that are women-friendly, encouraging grassroots women to develop self-esteem and self-confidence as leaders, and supporting legislation to increase women's representation at the decision-making level in political party's structure and other political institutions. Some support female colleagues by promoting their leadership, and amplify women's voices within political spheres. In the middle of the spectrum, there are male politicians who demonstrate passive support for women's empowerment by expressing verbal commitments without actively championing implementation. At the other end of the spectrum are the male politicians who engage in behaviours that perpetuate toxic masculinity and hinder progress on gender equality by making sexist remarks or harassing female colleagues.

An understanding of this spectrum of behaviour among male politicians reveals where allyship can be cultivated in Malaysia. It makes it possible to emphasise the need to promote empowering behaviours while challenging and addressing toxic behaviours within the country's political spaces.

Summary of findings

This research on male allies in Malaysian politics aimed to explore the commitment of male politicians in pursuing a gender equality related agenda and how this is perceived by others. By examining the perspectives of both men and women, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in promoting gender equality and creating a more just society.

The study underscores the significant influence of male politicians on gender norms in politics and the wider society as a result of their positions of power and privilege. Whether in their roles as government officials or party leaders, these individuals have demonstrated the capacity to introduce and endeavour to implement policies that foster changes in social and gender norms, albeit limited in scope and ambition. Their advantageous position of power offers them the means to shape and execute gender-friendly policies, and some have made efforts within their parties to ensure the inclusion of the women's agenda in training programmes, and to promote greater gender sensitivity in interactions. Despite the challenges they face, many of the male politicians who took part in this study are making active efforts to contribute to the empowerment of women in politics.

The results show that the male politicians at the centre of this research highlight their role as allies, rather than as feminists or pro-feminists. While they do not focus on promoting alternative masculinities, they do recognise some of the harmful patriarchal behaviours that are displayed in politics. They are also leveraging their influential positions to support initiatives that focus on women's rights and opportunities, although they often do so in protectionist ways, and through

individual ad-hoc initiatives rather than collaborative, coordinated work with feminist civil society organisations. They do support female colleagues, but often fail to speak out against men who demonstrate harmful behaviour towards women.

This top-down approach is of particular relevance for male politicians who do not readily identify as feminists because they misunderstand feminism as meaning women's domination or as a Western imposition, yet actively strive to advance gender equality.

This study discovered that male politicians have three types of relationship to the gender equality agenda and feminism, which are based on their own identities and motivation:

- internalising their role and position on gender equality as part of their responsibility to support and advocate for women's rights and the women's agenda
- recognising the importance of women's support for their political survival and, therefore, the need to lead initiatives on the women's agenda, and
- actively promoting gender equality, but also taking action to advocate for systematic change for the benefit of their political parties and for the wider society.

This research has revealed three main obstacles to the engagement of male politicians in the pursuit of gender equality in politics: lack of societal demand; lack of buy-in from other stakeholders; and a distrust of men's work on gender issues. These obstacles are often internalised by the male politicians in a way that reflects the gendered norms in society that question their roles as gender champions. It has also identified three enablers that contribute positively to male politicians' endorsement of gender equality initiatives: male privilege and political authority; party ideologies; and international influences on social norms.

This study's exploration of men's internalisation of their roles as advocates and allies complements a wider body of research on the challenges facing women in reaching decision-making levels or addressing gender equality issues in politics.

Implications for policy, practice and research

In response to ongoing gender inequality and the exclusion of women in politics, this section presents seven implications based on the research findings. The recommendations focus on the roles of political parties, male politicians, and other stakeholders in fostering and reinforcing the engagement of male politicians as agents of change for gender equality.

Implications for political parties

1. Initiate and expand conversations about men's role in the promotion of gender equality

The participants in this study identified very few male allies from Malaysia's political parties, and noted the absence of constructive discourse on their roles in promoting gender equality. Initiating and expanding conversations on men's role in gender equality are, therefore, key steps to encourage open and intellectual discourse on gender-related matters within the party system. In particular, this needs to involve the overwhelmingly male-dominated party leadership – a step that could be mandatory, given the high levels of resistance.

This research found political parties to be both obstacles and enablers to the embedding of gender issues in politics. It found that a shift is needed from a paradigm that categorises women's issues and gender equality discourse as women's concerns, to one that emphasises gender equality and the empowerment of women as universal principles of justice and human rights.

Framing discussions on gender equality in broader terms and emphasising their relevance to all individuals, including men, would make these topics more accessible and relatable not only to politicians, but also to society at large. It is important to engage young male politicians, for example, together with their female counterparts, in continuous orientations, conversations, training, advocacy programmes and other relevant activities that enhance their consciousness and actions on gender equality, particularly in relation to greater female political leadership.

2. Embed and institutionalise gender equitable practices within political parties

The study indicates there is a misogynist culture in some parties, and lack of incentive to act, because there are only a few men interested in pursuing a gender related agenda. One way, therefore, of pushing for the implementation of the quota and other gender equitable practices is by the inclusion of gender sensitive language in policies. This can be in the form of institutionalised policy and practice documents that have the goal of creating cognitive and behavioural change in party outlook and actions. Such policy should, not only plan for structural change that allows for increased participation of women in key political positions, but also encourage gender sensitivity in party's regulations, protocols and published materials. The policy should ensure that commitment to gender equality should not be compromised for political or other considerations such as leadership power. The policy should also include strong statements and strategies aimed at eradicating harmful masculine behaviour and violence against women in politics.

It is imperative to have more women in leadership structures to ensure gender related issue are given higher importance and prominence in political discussion. Gender issues should be elevated to become integral components of the mainstream political agenda and priorities across various political parties. Indirectly, more women leaders should make it easier for male politicians to openly

show their support and commit to the agenda. It will also help to liberate women from specific subservient roles in parties and provide them with equal opportunities for visible leadership, therefore challenging prevailing gender norms and practices which pose significant obstacles that can diminish the impact of mainstreaming. In addition, the party can promote awareness and foster a gender-friendly policy and environment.

Implications for male politicians

An effective approach is to ensure that cooperation between women and men in promoting gender equality is equal and inclusive. This requires male political leaders to fulfil their pledges to increase women's leadership within their locus of power.

3. Engage with (other) young men in politics

Young male politicians can become important change agents for gender equality. Their engagement as allies for gender equality could be particularly impactful because of their connection to younger generations and their ability to connect to society as role models and through social media. Younger male politicians, particularly those from progressive political parties, might be most willing and able to engage in gender equality work.

Male politicians should be encouraged to see their women constituents as being as valuable and significant as their male voters. To enhance their awareness of gender and women's issues, it would be productive for them to interact and engage with women's advocacy groups and experts in the field, including feminist and women's rights researchers and civil society organisations. This may help to demystify the idea of feminism as a Western practice that is incompatible with local, particularly Islamic, values (see recommendation 5 for more on partnerships). Respondents in this study have referred to such engagement as a valuable influence on their understanding of gender equality.

Younger male politicians can also be supported to initiate joint initiatives that emphasise the importance of gender equality and demonstrate how everyone benefits from a more equitable society and engage them in discussions and decision-making processes related to gender equality policies. The participation of younger male politicians in such approaches would help to build stronger alliances with them and foster their active participation and support for gender equality initiatives.

The mentoring of younger male politicians by more senior female politicians within political parties may also be an effective way to enhance their awareness of gender and women's issues. While this is not a clear finding from the study, the researchers' observations of such approaches amongst politicians who were not included in the study have shown this to be a potentially effective strategy.

4. Press consistently for policy change in collaboration with women's and feminist organisations

By harnessing and leveraging the strength and expertise of women's and feminist organisations, male politicians can build comprehensive strategies and initiatives that may, in turn, create more impactful policies and programmes for Malaysia. One essential organisational change, for example, is the incorporation of gender-sensitive budget allocations to ensure plans and responses to multi-sectoral issues include and prioritise women's concerns both structurally and deliberately, so that these are not an afterthought. Male politicians can tap into the resources and knowledge of the women's and feminist organisations that are championing these issues in Malaysia. This could transform their rhetoric on gender equality into the active championing of policies, whether by introducing them or advocating for their implementation in their constituencies. This proactive approach is essential to

visibly demonstrate a sincere commitment to women's rights on the part of male politicians and their shared responsibility for addressing gender inequality.

Male politicians could make more effort to increase networking opportunities with feminists and women's organisations to uproot and transform harmful gender relations and stereotypes and to broaden the impact of empowering women and promoting gender equality. Women's NGOs, in particular, are experts on gender issues and can provide entry points for gender equality initiatives. Such collaboration could also bolster the societal support base for male politicians by providing them with allies to apply pressure on other political actors. This strategic partnership is crucial to overcome the obstacles that arise from the absence of allies. By affiliating with feminist or women's movements, male politicians can benefit from a broader network of support, mobilise resources, and collectively promote gender equality and women's rights.

Allies could also advocate for the institutionalisation of a policy mandating for a minimum of 30% representation of women in decision-making roles across public and private sectors, from agencies to states, local governments and political parties, to fortify women's participation across all organisational tiers. This would also respond to a finding from this study: that the participation of women is one of the most common policy agendas that male allies can rally behind. An effective approach is to ensure the cooperation between women and men in promoting gender equality is done in an equal and inclusive manner. This necessitates, for example, calling on male leaders to fulfil their pledges to increase women's leadership within their locus of power.

5. Engage with religious leaders

Religious leaders play a vital role in constructing gender norms in Malaysia and in opening up space for women in the public realm, particularly in the Malay Muslim community. Working with these leaders could be a vital strategy for male politicians who support gender equality, and for other male politicians, whose decisions to become allies are shaped by their interpretations of Islam. More discussions about the connection between Islam and women's rights facilitated by men in politics could broaden the interest of other men in gender equality work.

As spiritual guides with authority, influence, and credibility, religious leaders influence individuals' decision-making processes and personal identities, shape people's attitudes and behaviours, and change social norms within their own networks and communities. Religious leaders have a critical role in promoting awareness of the rights of the most vulnerable people, including women. To initiate this process, it is vital to utilise language that captures the principles of gender justice yet remains acceptable for both religious leaders and communities. While gender equality might be perceived as a threat to the community, framing it as a pursuit of justice can foster a more receptive environment.

Religious leaders could also take part in gender training initiatives, with esteemed religious scholars offering theological insights. This inclusion would lend credibility and depth to training programmes. As the process evolves, religious leaders can take on the responsibility for planning and conducting gender training workshops, contributing to the broader cause of fostering gender awareness and justice.

Implications for other stakeholders

6. Establish and increase networking opportunities with feminists and women's organisations

Women's organisations could proactively establish networks and collaborations with male politicians interested in gender equality to better embed their insights and support into the policy making processes. This could, ultimately, lead to joint initiatives and advocacy efforts to promote women's engagement in politics.

This process requires trust-building with male politicians who align with (pro)feminist values and advocate for gender equality, as this research finds high levels of scepticism amongst activists, especially women, as well as distrust in the motivations of male politicians. Network building based on trust can help to overcome these obstacles and better enable male allies to become instrumental in dismantling the structural and legal barriers that hinder women's leadership participation in politics. Such networking opportunities can also help to address male allyship that sometimes takes a negative approach to gender equality, such as those based on protectionism or an emphasis on difference.

Women's organisations can also facilitate male politicians to foster gender equality and demonstrate their genuine commitment to women's rights. By working closely with them, women's organisations can ensure the efforts of male politicians go beyond the current widespread organising of stereotypical women's activities, which results in these efforts being seen as political calculation and inauthentic grandstanding to win votes. Political organisations should be consistent in integrating women's needs into every stage of policymaking, which would also mean addressing the underlying causes of masculine gender norms.

7. Prospects for future research

Future research on men as facilitators for change in politics needs to expand beyond established notions of 'male allies' and 'male engagement'. It is essential to develop effective methods to measure and document the impact of change, illustrating the specific ways in which men can have an impact on this transformative process. Future investigations should centre on men's individual experiences of gendered disadvantages stemming from stereotypes and gender inequality. This approach would help ensure a comprehensive understanding of their ongoing involvement in advocacy for gender equality.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

About this report

This Malaysia country report is part of ALIGN's 'Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities' series.

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Citation

Azmi, Z., Endut, N., Selamat, N.H. and Hasan, M.R. (2024) *Men as allies in shaping a gender equality society: perspectives from Malaysia*. ALIGN Report. London: ODI/ALIGN.

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ALIGN is led by ODI and currently supported by a range of international donors including the Government of Canada (through Global Affairs Canada).

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