



Gender Outlook Forum 2025
“Advancing Gender Equality in ASEAN”

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The Saujana Hotel Kuala Lumpur

Organised By:
Wanita Berdaya Selangor

- In Collaboration With:**
1. Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) Malaysia
 2. The Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)
 3. Gender Studies Programme, Universiti Malaya (UM)
 4. Pusat Kepimpinan Tun Fatimah Hashim, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

Community Partner:
Yayasan Hasanah

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Day 1 (28 August 2025)

1. Welcoming Remarks by YB Puan Anfaal Saari, Selangor State Executive Councillor of Women Empowerment and Social Welfare

The welcoming remarks to the Gender Outlook Forum 2025 were delivered by YB Puan Anfaal Saari who warmly welcomed Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail; YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development of Malaysia; Her Excellency Madam Veronica Tan, Vice Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia; Puan Siti Faridah Abdul Samad, Chief Executive Officer, Wanita Berdaya Selangor (WBS); H.E. Edmund Bon Tai Soon, Representative of Malaysia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR); Parents At Work Australia; UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and UNICEF Malaysia.

Thanks were also delivered to the Gender Outlook Forum's collaborators: the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD); the Centre for Research on Women & Gender (KANITA) at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM); the Tun Fatimah Hashim Women's Leadership Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); and the Gender Studies Programme at the University of Malaya (UM). YB Anfaal Saari also thanked the Selangor State Executive Council, members of the Selangor State Legislative Assembly; the esteemed state secretary; federal and state government agencies; heads of departments, representatives from Menteri Besar Selangor Incorporated (MBI Selangor) and its subsidiaries; boards of members of WBS, panellists; non-governmental organisations (NGOs); academia; think tanks; experts; VVIPs; members of the media, honoured guests, and international delegates.

The importance of the Gender Outlook Forum 2025 as a platform bringing various stakeholders to share their invaluable expertise and experiences for the advancement of gender equality across borders was emphasised in YB Puan Anfaal Saari's speech. She introduced WBS as a Government Linked Company (GLC) created under the Menteri Besar Selangor Incorporated (MBI Selangor) in 2021 to empower Selangor women through the Selangor Women's Policy and Action Plan 2024-2026 via key pillars of research, policy development, capacity building and empowerment.

Malaysia's position as ASEAN chair for 2025 was also stressed by YB Puan Anfaal Saari as playing a critical role in influencing gender equality in Malaysia and ASEAN as a whole. The Gender Outlook Forum 2025 is therefore an important platform where various stakeholders do not just convene, but also converse, bringing dialogue about women, men and children together.

In setting the precedent for the Gender Outlook Forum 2025, YB Anfaal mentioned key developments in the status of girls and women, both globally and in Malaysia. Globally, the The Gender Equality Index has stuck at 0.465 for the past three years, with Malaysia ranking at 103 out of 146 countries, scoring a mere 0.6681. And despite scoring a celebratory feat of 0.995 in educational attainment, girls and women in Malaysia remain lagging in politics (0.102 in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022¹) which shows women in Malaysia are mostly ignored in policy-making and budget-setting. Political representation, economic inclusion and social protection remain huge gaps for women in the country.

With this in mind, YB Puan Anfaal Saari pointed out that the Selangor state government has launched a gender mainstreaming pilot project and gender responsive budgeting across state government and local councils, to align with the country's and ASEAN's commitment to gender equality – the first state in Malaysia to do so. Meanwhile, WBS has also launched two academies to train women, which are the Akademi Kepimpinan Wanita (AKW) Selangor and the Sidang Wanita Selangor (SIWANIS), equipping women with leadership skills, policy knowledge and networking opportunities to catapult them in decision-making roles.

YB Puan Anfaal Saari also pointed to the Human Development Index (HDI) where Malaysia has fallen by one spot to number 62 while the country's score on the Gender Social Norms Index is at 99.45%, reflecting the deeply-embedded structural barriers and biases that women leaders in Malaysia face. To counter such barriers and perception, YB Puan Anfaal Saari called for the gender-lens to be embedded in every policy-making, budget-setting, and crisis management, with clear metrics implemented. Measures such as the HDI are therefore crucial benchmarks to chart women's and girls' progress to meet Malaysia's United Nations Sustainable Goal 5 by the year 2030.

In ending her speech, YB Puan Anfaal Saari called for all stakeholders to empower women's leadership, and to unlock the immense talent of women across Selangor to build a stronger, more inclusive state.

¹ <https://www.undp.org/malaysia/gender-equality>

2. Opening Remarks by YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development of Malaysia

The opening remarks were delivered by YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri who thanked the presence of YB Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail whom she credits for creating a fairer society; YB Puan Anfaal Saari for creating this meaningful platform; HE Excellency Madame Veronica Tan; H.E. Edmund Bon Tai Soon, Representative of Malaysia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR); Puan Siti Faridah Abdul Samad; Parents At Work Australia, the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and in the Pacific, and UNICEF Malaysia, all state and national representatives of the government agencies, panellists, NGOs, academia, think tanks, experts, VVIPs, members of the media and honoured guests.

YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri began her heartfelt speech by saying that the forum was not for women only, but for Malaysia as a whole, and that by uplifting women, we also uplift men, children and communities as well. It was emphasised that when women are empowered, the benefits extend to society at large. While poverty levels among women in ASEAN have been significantly reduced, ongoing challenges were acknowledged including the disproportionate effects of climate change on women and the rising cost of living which has constrained access to childcare.

It was stated that no country can achieve its full potential if women are left behind, making gender equality a national imperative. Malaysia's aspiration to achieve developed nation status by 2030 is supported by global frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979², and Sustainable Development Goal 5³ (SDG 5) on gender equality.

Remarkable progress has been observed among Malaysian women and girls, who now have one of the highest educational attainment rates globally, empowering them to make informed choices about their health and wellbeing. Women have also advanced into leadership positions in government-linked companies (GLCs). Policies have been progressively introduced to extend the duration of maternity leave, formalise provisions for paternity leave, and safeguard women against dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy. Additionally, citizenship laws have been amended to allow Malaysian mothers to confer citizenship to their children. These milestones were recognised as being built on the enduring work and courage of both women and men.

Despite this, women's labour force participation remains among the lowest in ASEAN, largely due to caregiving responsibilities. To address these gaps, a national

² CEDAW is a landmark international treaty adopted by the United Nations in 1979 that defines and aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in the public and private spheres.

³ SDG 5 is the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal focused on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030. This goal has nine targets and fourteen indicators.

women's policy has been launched, focusing on key pillars such as the economy and leadership, while promoting gender sensitivity in decision-making.

Legislative reforms have further reinforced women's rights and safety. The Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022⁴ and the criminalisation of stalking has strengthened protections in public spaces. Nationwide daycare centres have been established to support working mothers. Through KPWKM's Wanita Bangkit programme, thousands of women have been empowered as entrepreneurs and digital workers. The KASIH Ibu Tunggal (KasihniTA) programme, rebranded in 2025, continues to enhance the financial literacy and economic empowerment of single mothers.

Initiatives such as those by Agensi Kaunseling & Pengurusan Kredit (AKPK) have enabled women to contribute more meaningfully to their families and the nation. The RM5 million Perantis Programme introduced by KPWKM, has created mentorship and networking opportunities including in fields such as politics and health.

Under the Madani government, structural reforms have been prioritised. Budget 2025 introduced targeted measures for women, entrepreneurs, and youth. Malaysia's gender equality commitments remain anchored in CEDAW and SDG 5, with a post-CEDAW implementation plan under development and stronger labour protections being established. These combined measures have been undertaken to close gender gaps through coordinated and evidence-based action. It was reminded that Malaysia has come a long way since the days when women struggled for access to education, but much remains to be achieved. For every glass ceiling that has been broken, many more still await.

3. Keynote Speech by the Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail, Former Deputy Minister of Malaysia

Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail opened her keynote speech by thanking WBS for holding a meaningful platform, saying that the forum not only outlines our key challenges but shared goals as well. She thanked YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri; YB Puan Anfaal Shaari, HE Excellency Madame Veronica Tan, H.E. Edmund Bon Tai Soon, Puan Siti Faridah Abdul Samad, Parents At Work Australia, the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and in the Pacific, and UNICEF Malaysia, all state and national representatives of the government agencies, panellists, NGOs, academia, think tanks, experts, VVIPs, members of the media and honoured guests.

It was emphasised that women's empowerment strengthens rather than threatens the family institution. Mothers were described as role models for their sons and daughters, and empowered women were recognised as amplifiers of family

⁴ Malaysia's Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022 (ASHA 2022) established a Tribunal for Anti-Sexual Harassment (TAGS) to provide a cost-effective redress mechanism for victims of any form of unwanted sexual conduct that causes offense, humiliation, or poses a threat to well-being.

values, shaping courage, empathy, respect, and strong morals in their children.

It was noted that although Malaysian women achieve high levels of education, they continue to lag in political and economic participation. While daughters are successfully educated, the means to fully realise that education remain limited. Attention was drawn to the importance of how sons and daughters are raised and how care work is valued within society. Gratitude was expressed to the speaker's mother for her role in shaping her values and character.

It was also highlighted that cities and classrooms have been designed to ensure no gender, race, or age is left behind. The progress of women in Malaysia was attributed to the pioneering efforts of Tun Fatimah Hashim, whose legacy has been advanced through government initiatives.

A call was made for efforts to be cohesive, impactful, and aligned with national and regional goals, extending Malaysia's commitment toward ASEAN cooperation. This includes combating gender-based violence (GBV) and promoting a peaceful, prosperous, and people-centred ASEAN.

Participants were encouraged to connect, share, and learn from one another, as the forum was presented as a platform to move from data to dignity. The session was formally declared open by the Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail.

4. Session 1: Advancing Gender Mainstreaming: Strengthening Government Capacities and Gender-Responsive Data Systems

Panellists and Moderator:

- i. **Mr. Wan Mohd Shahrulnizam Wan Mohd Najuri, Senior Director of Population and Demographic Statistics Division at Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**
- ii. **Ms. Sneha Kaul, Statistics Analyst with UN Women's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific**
- iii. **Ms. Omna Sreeni-Ong, Founder, Principal Consultant at ENGENDER Consultancy (Moderator)**

“Integrating Gender-Responsive Data Approaches In National Development Frameworks” by Mr. Wan Mohd Shahrulnizam Wan Mohd Najuri

In order to create better gender policy outcomes, the importance of developing better gender-disaggregated data cannot be overlooked. It is only through such techniques that an intersectional lens of gender policy can be implemented.

So far, key states that have charted the way for gender mainstreaming are Penang and Selangor. Some civil society organisations (CSOs) have also implemented gender-disaggregated data in their work, but even though Malaysia already has gender-responsive data, the data must be disaggregated further in order

to shed better light on the specific inequalities that girls and women in the country face in order to measure with real-life outcomes and create better policies for this target population. This is something that the Madani government has mandated.

It was pointed out by the panel that in terms of statistics, Malaysian women and girls sit at 68% in the areas of economy and politics in the Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum (WEF)⁵ since 2006, despite outshining their male counterparts in health and education. The female population in Malaysia is also increasingly ageing. In terms of life choices, more and more Malaysian women are choosing careers over relationships and marriage. It is projected that the Malaysian population will peak by 42 million 2059⁶, and then will undergo a downward trend. Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail was applauded for launching work regarding gender disaggregated data but much more disaggregation needs to be done, especially on the district and local levels.

As mentioned above, Malaysian women lag in the economy, exiting the labour force after a certain age due to motherhood and caring responsibilities. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) believes that many more women are actually involved in the labour force, but this is not reflected in statistics as these women are informal workers. Women also dominate critical support workers, and the gender wage gap is increasing.

In summarising his session, Mr. Wan said DOSM will work with the government and state authority and later with CSOs to increase the literacy of improving gender data, pointing out that it is a loss when women exit the labour force. Gender-responsive data is not just for the concern of the federal government, but also CSOs, local authority and the state. With strong commitment, gender disaggregated data can help push for greater gender equality in Malaysia.

“Closing the Data Gap: Strengthening Gender-Responsive with Evidence-Based Insights” by Ms. Sneha Kaul

Ms Sneha's presentation shone light on the specifics behind data, pointing to the scarcity and “gender-blindness” of most data that is available out there. There is little gender data in the indicators, with most of them on climate and environment instead. Most data that is available are also gender-blind – despite being the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,⁷ a landmark 1995 document for women's rights and gender equality. Ms Sneha's works have found that not only gaps exist, but that gender-specific data often “arrive late” and “do not talk to each other”, thus lacking in statistical depth.

In 2024, UN Women and PARIS21 introduced the Gender Data Outlook

⁵Malaysia's Gender Gap Ranks Among Worst In Asean

<https://ova.galencentre.org/malaysias-gender-gap-ranks-among-worst-in-asean>

⁶ DOSM sees Malaysia population peaking at 42 million in 2059, Chinese community shrinking under 15pc, gender imbalance worsening

malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/07/11/dosm-sees-malaysia-population-peaking-at-42-m-in-2059-chinese-community-shrinking-under-15pc-gender-imbalance-worsening/183589

⁷ A resolution adopted by the UN at the end of the Fourth World Conference on Women on 15 September 1995

(GDO),⁸ a report that assesses countries' levels of statistical maturity using a new global framework and corresponding measure for gender data capacity. The Outlook looks at enabling environment, data production and accessibility. It asks the questions, such as: "Is data available? Is it accessible through multiple formats?"

A good example of gender-responsive data (GRD) can be gleaned from the Maldives example: within one week of the COVID19 lockdown, the country's bureau of statistics sought to investigate the short-term impact of COVID19 by engaging with UN and other stakeholders. They found that many women had lost their jobs and therefore saw a decrease in their income. This quick-thinking in getting the data made sure that the Maldivian government was able to pivot their policy choices to make sure that women in the country did not suffer economically further.

Another best practice can be learned from Tonga's first gender environment survey which strengthened their disaster risk reduction capacity. The government of Tonga worked with many stakeholders and through consultative ways which produced much-needed informative gender data during times of disasters.

Discussion

Gender Responsive Data (GRD) is important and a whole-of-society concern mandate upheld by frameworks such as the Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Generated Data (CGD). In emphasising GRD's importance, it was pointed out by the moderator that GRD is a collective responsibility of the government, CSOs and organisations such as WBS itself.

However, as of now, Malaysia lacks institutional mechanisms to bring it all together – an example is mobile phone ownership in Malaysia. Despite 90% of mobile ownership in the country, there lacks any situational analysis to investigate how people in Malaysia use their mobile phones to access government aid. Another example was how during COVID19, school children could not access laptops to study. Hence, there is a need for more specific data. Another example of the lack of data can be found in Indonesia and the Philippines where villagers rely mostly on illiterate village elders as well as local authorities who do not know how to properly store data. As a result, important data sits in drawers, and in the case of village elders, they do not know how to use mobile phones – all risky instances in times of crisis.

Data literacy was another important point that was suggested by the panel, even above artificial intelligence (AI). People must be empowered first in data literacy, for example through empowering village elders. Data intersectionality was also another key point mentioned. Disaggregation by sex is important, but so is by location, for example in finding out the number of women in urban areas vs rural areas. The panellists and moderator agreed that data is a time consuming process, hence the need for political will to push for it. There must also be a push in demand by users. Data should be in our everyday language. It's a whole-of-society issue. In rounding up the session, the moderator applauded CSOs and academia for already taking up the task of gender-disaggregated data.

⁸ <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/gender-data-outlook-2024>

Q&A session

A question was posed by one audience member who asked why women's access to education and health are not translated into greater political participation; she had observed that when examples of statistics in states such as Kelantan and Terengganu are looked into, this disparity is very stark, and that this data needs to be spread out in order to gather all stakeholders work in ending gender inequalities such as Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Ms. Sneha responded that this is why data accessibility is important and communicated in a way that is tailored to different stakeholders. She cited the example of the media which needs accessible data that is not intricate nor complex, as well as the importance of using social media such as Instagram to communicate data to laymen. The question was also answered by Mr. Wan who said that DOSM is currently pursuing Majlis Statistik Data Negeri, which is a high-level initiative. Secondly, DOSM is going down to villages to obtain granular data. Meanwhile, in terms of technology, it was pointed out that the Malaysia Gender Dashboard is being developed to facilitate data on multiple levels, especially on the state level.

5. Special Remarks by HE Veronica Tan, Vice Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia

HE Veronica's speech centred on Indonesia's commitment to gender equality, not just as an aspiration but a constitutional mandate. In her speech, H.E Veronica pointed out that gender equality is deeply woven in Indonesian society, and that the country has embedded gender responsive data across ministries. Indonesia's push for gender equality is backed by gender-disaggregated data, which allows them to identify gaps and therefore intervene in policies and laws, such as in trying to eradicate Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

In its attempt to strengthen family values, Indonesia is working to empower women from village councils to endorse them to participate in leadership positions, for example in the issue of climate change where women not only need to be empowered but recognised as well.

In Indonesian villages, women are encouraged to speak up on village matters. Representation matters, and therefore women are encouraged to talk about issues that affect their lives.

HE Veronica concluded her speech by stating that Indonesia is preparing to become an ageing society. Gender equality is not a national issue, but a regional challenge and global challenge, and she remains confident that as strategic partners in ASEAN, Malaysia and Indonesia can work together to push for greater gender equality in the region.

6. Session 2: Women in Malaysian politics: representation, progress and pathways

Panellists and Moderator:

- i. YBrS. Professor Dr. Wong Chin Huat, Political Scientist, Sunway University**
- i. YBrS. Dr. Nur Azyan Shalihah binti Mohd Shafee, Research and Library Division, Parliament of Malaysia**
- ii. Ms. Yeong Pey Jung, Senior Researcher, Penang Institute**
- iii. Dr Zaireeni Azmi, Senior Lecturer, Centre for Research on Women & Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia**
- iv. Ms Rusni Tajari, Senior Manager, Strategy and Policy, Wanita Berdaya Selangor (Moderator)**

“Getting Women In: Lessons from a Decade of Advocacy and Quota Design to Advance Women Representation’ by YBrS. Professor Dr. Wong Chin Huat

Professor Dr. Wong Chin Huat’s presentation centred on how to increase the number of women politicians in Malaysia. Women parliamentarians in Malaysia hover at 12%⁹. Key initiatives in the past few decades to improve this include increasing the supply of women candidates (for example, Women’s Candidacy Initiative, 1991; Sidang Wanita program by Penang Women’s Development Corporation (PWDC) since 2000; and WBS’s own Sidang Wanita Selangor program since 2023).

Another initiative has been conducted to introduce quotas, for example, voluntary quotas under the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system, introduced by parties such as Democratic Action Party (DAP) in 2014; Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) in 2024, and MUDA in 2023, as well as Empower’s collaboration with other CSOs advocating a mandatory 30% quota for women candidates across all political parties by the next general election (GE16).

Meanwhile, quotas beyond the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) systems are another measure, referring to systems that create special, appointed, or additional seats for women to ensure their representation. Examples of this include Terengganu in 2003; Penang’s TWOAS White Paper (2021): the Penang state government’s tabling of a white paper on the Top-Up Women-Only-Additional-Seats (TWOAS) model, proposing a mechanism to increase women’s representation in the state assembly, and Selangor’s declared intention for TWOAS (2025). The Selangor state government has also declared its intention to implement the TWOAS system in 2025.

The last type of measure involves incentivising parties via public funding, for example the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) on political financing (since 2022) as well as, BERSIH (since 2021) and IDEAS (since 2022):

It was suggested by Professor Dr. Wong Chin Huat that replacing male candidates with female candidates is another viable option, noting that replacing a

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_Dewan_Rakyat

strong male candidate can feel like a loss, while defeating a weak male is a win. Creating multiple-member constituencies like the Closed-List Proportional Representation (CLPR) system is a good example, and so are the successful quota systems in Singapore and New Zealand.

Suggestions included party-imposed quotas and public funding, although Malaysia's decentralised system poses challenges. Professor Dr. Wong Chin Huat also mentioned special candidacy tiers in Uganda, best loser selection in Samoa, and seat sharing in Pakistan. He concluded his presentation by proposing women-only additional seats in certain Malaysian states, such as Sabah, Terengganu, Pahang, and Selangor.

“From Barriers to Buy-In: Advancing Women’s Political Participation and Leadership in Post GE15 Malaysia’ by YBrs. Dr. Nur Azyan Shalihah binti Mohd Shafee

The theme of Dr. Nur Azyan’s presentation centred on why Malaysian women’s political participation has been low. The reasons cited in her presentation include personal challenges such as confidence and resources, societal and cultural pressures, institutional obstacles, and a political structure that favours men. As political positions become higher, the number of women decreases among candidates with parties often choosing more males as candidates deemed more likely to win. In recent elections, Malaysia saw a significant drop in women candidates.

More hindrance include women’s resistance themselves, with some of them citing merit over quota, although definitions of merit vary between parties. Amanah, for example, defines merit as leadership quality and being able to prove that the candidate can win. In Keadilan, they run a “headhunt” for high-calibre women to run under the party banner, Dr. Nur Azyan noted. Women MPs that were interviewed by her about the female quota solicited lukewarm response. Moreover, the concern faced by Bersatu and Amanah is that they do not have enough candidates to fill the 30% quota.

Of all parties, DAP leads the way in the most contested female candidates. In the case of the party being fined for not fielding more female candidates, they simply pay the required fine. Meanwhile, PAS has said that if there are enough women, they will definitely field them. DAP Selangor, meanwhile, admit that men are allocated more safer seats but women are tested in weaker constitutions.

Moreover, some parties worry that mandatory quotas may limit their candidate options. DAP leads in female candidates, but women often face tougher constituencies than men. In her concluding remarks, Dr. Nur Azyan emphasised the need for male allies in supporting women's political engagement along with the importance of national, party, and individual support.

“Mapping Women in Power: A Data-Driven Analysis of Representation and Role of Women in Malaysian Politics (1955– 2025)” by Ms. Yeong Pey Jung

Ms. Yeong Pey Jung’s presentation centred on the statistics of women’s political participation. She began her presentation by stating the three definitions of power:

mandate; agenda; policy and budget. She pointed out that the General Elections 14 (GE14) recorded the highest women's representation in parliament, but it was at only 14.4% – which was not even half.

The key numbers across the years as pointed out by Ms. Yeong Pey Jung are as below:

- It took 7 elections (27 years) for women MPs to rise above 5%; 11 elections (44 years) for women MPs to rise above 10%; and 14 elections (63 years) for women MPs to come close to 15%.
- In terms of representation of women in state assemblies, It took 9 elections (36 years) for women Members of State Legislative Assembly (or "ADUNS") to rise above 5%; 13 elections (54 years) for women Members of Parliaments (MPs) to rise above 10% and 15 elections, and Malaysia has yet to break 13% — well short of minimum 30%
- The representation of women in the Senate is more volatile: 20+% from 2014 to 2017, followed by a period of decline averaging 15% from 2018 to 2024, and climbing back up to 20% in 2025.
- The first female minister was elected in 1971, there was a long plateau of 8% from 1981 to 1990, and then a decline from 2003 to 2013. There was a high jump of 8.2 % in 2018 to 17.9%.
- Meanwhile, the trend for women as deputy ministers shows that it declined from 1982 to 2003 after a spike of 13.8%; a decade of incline (peak of 18.5%) before dipping. Malaysia saw its first female DPM in 2018.

It was pointed out by Ms. Yeong Pey Jung that women cabinet ministers are overrepresented in community/family portfolios (two-decade mainstay); sometimes the rural portfolio as well. Women also dominate in education, science and technology portfolios. The Trade and Industry portfolio was the stronghold of one woman for 21 years (held by Dato' Seri Rafidah Aziz) while finance, Home Affairs, defence, and transport are still out of reach.

As for Deputy Ministers, there has been a wider breadth since 2008: women appear across finance, transport, communication, energy, economy and community portfolios . An early hard-power entry was in the finance portfolio in the late 1970s. There has been no deputy stints so far for Defence, Home Affairs, and Foreign Affairs.

In concluding her presentation, Ms. Yeong Pey Jung emphasised the importance of data to track women's progress and gaps in politics which will then translate into actionable policy steps. She said that it is important to establish a publicly-available repository of gender-disaggregated political data.

“Steppingstones or Stumbling Blocks? Political Pathways for Women through Party Wings’ by Dr. Zaireeni Azmi

Dr Zaireeni Azmi's presentation also examined the barriers that women face in politics. However, her presentation involved examining women's political wing, which she argues can be a great political platform when properly used.

Malaysian women play a key role in supporting their parties and mobilising communities, yet they mostly reinforce traditional views of women as supporters rather than leaders. Historically, groups like Kaum Ibu and Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS) have been active against colonial rule, but AWAS challenged male dominance more effectively. Khadijah Sidek was expelled from UMNO for

demanding a greater share of power. There are few women in leadership roles in political parties, such as PAS, which only has two female representatives in its leadership body.

Despite some progress in parties like MUDA, women still do not reach 30% representation. Systemic barriers, such as quotas, hinder advancement. Personal experiences reveal that women's wings can be both symbolic and functional tools for participation in politics. Some women describe starting their journeys in these wings, but transitioning to more mainstream roles is often necessary for true inclusion. In concluding her presentation, Dr Zaireeni Azmi stated that women's wings are valuable but their effectiveness depends on how power is utilised, making the situation complex rather than straightforward.

Q&A session

A question was posed by Ms. Anja*, a social entrepreneur, to Dr. Nur Azyan. She observed that politicians who are not politically-savvy are unable to get important proposals accepted or championed in parliament. Ms. Anja asked whether this could be the reason for delayed political buy-in. Dr. Nur Azyan said this was not the case as observed in parliament and that women MPs are actually seeking more work and demand greater participation in committees, for example in Kuasa Pilihan Khas Parlimen (PSSC), as well as in debates. Women MPs appreciate when male speakers allocate them extra time to speak. Dr. Nur Azyan firmly believes that the parliament can play an important role in empowering women to speak, especially on major issues, and that the way they speak and dress should not be focused on and scrutinised.

Another question was posed by a YB on the importance of male allies; and secondly whether it has been imparted enough to the public on the importance of getting more women in politics. She highlighted that the failure to do so means a loss to the nation. Dr Zaireeni Azmi said that KANITA has done research into male politicians and found out that they are indeed supportive of female politicians. However, she said that women must band with themselves first as men may be reluctant to call themselves feminists. She pointed out that men are reluctant to talk about the female political agenda. KANITA has held training and seminars to promote knowledge on why women need to be political leaders. The Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill (now the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022 (ASHA 2022)) took 30 years to become a reality. Meanwhile, Dr. Wong Chin Huat emphasised that institutions must first be changed, which will then only translate to a change in social norms and that that will increase the number of women in politics.

7. Session 3: Reimagining Care Systems: A Path to Gender Equality Through Family-Centered Policies

Panellists and Moderator:

- i. Ms. Emma Walsh, Chief Executive Officer, Parents at Work**
- ii. HE Veronica Tan, Vice Minister of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, Republic of Indonesia (RI)**

- iii. Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin, Senior Economist World Bank
iv. Dr. Christopher Choong Weng Wai, Deputy Director of Research,
Khazanah Research Institute (Moderator)

“Rethinking Long Term Care Financing: Sustainable Solutions for an Aging World” by HE Veronica Tan,

H.E Veronica’s presentation centred on the lived realities of women in her home country Indonesia and the best practices in policies that can be learned from them. She began her presentation by stating that Indonesia faces a rapid ageing population and the issue of unpaid labour which is disproportionately performed by women, worsening inequality and hindering growth. There is an increasing demand for long-term care in Indonesia which is recognised as both a domestic issue and a labour concern. The Indonesian government is implementing the ‘Care Economy Roadmap’¹⁰ and working with various ministries to ensure women have access to care services and a say in policies. Efforts include raising female labour force participation and preparing a social protection bill. Sustainable financing models are being developed, integrating care work within national policy, and utilising public-private partnerships to support marginalised groups.

“From Policy to Practice: Building Care-Responsive Workplaces for a Fairer Future”

Ms. Emma Walsh’s presentation emphasised the importance of cross-stakeholder collaboration in creating gender-responsive workplaces for better equality for both men and women. She began her presentation by introducing her organisation Parents at Work Australia which assists employers and employees in addressing challenges related to work and care, including flexible work hours and parental leave. She highlights that family-friendly workplaces are essential for achieving gender equality and that both Malaysia and Australia share similar aspirations in this regard. In Australia, many households face high childcare costs, and a significant number of women remain financially vulnerable due to workplace inequalities. With the introduction of family-friendly policies by the government of Australia, and working with the labour ministry, policies such as parental leave have been introduced to include fathers as well. Such initiatives are part of the 7-step ‘Care Economy Roadmap’ involving multi-stakeholders and multi-source financing that include other key family-friendly initiatives as well such as social insurance mechanisms to help marginalised groups. Australia has also developed a curriculum for carework, with care being embedded in various levels of the policy process, involving public-private financing. She also emphasised that it has been important for Australia to engage with the grassroots in shaping such policies, including women and those from the rural community. In developing a robust and comprehensive care policy, the government must be open and learn from different models. Ms. Emma Walsh stated that Parents at Work Australia offers benchmarks for organisations to assess and improve their practices in areas like flexible work and parental leave. Her organisation provides a suite of advisory, leadership and employee work life wellbeing programs to foster greater inclusion, equity and wellbeing outcomes in workplaces. The tools include a member advisory, guides, toolkits, networking events, research, certification and also the Work and Family Action Plan. She ended her presentation by encouraging Malaysian organisations to benchmark with her organisation for free to identify gaps and areas for improvement. Organisations interested in being benchmarked can do so by taking a 15-minute

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<https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/indonesia-launches-its-road-map-care-economy-more-gender-equal-world-work>

self-assessment at their website [here](#).¹¹

“Care as an Economic Driver: Investing in Family-Friendly Policies for Sustainable Growth” by Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin

Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin began her presentation by stating that Malaysia is fast becoming an ageing society with a decline in the working population, making it essential to incorporate more women into the workforce and making sure they stay there. While the World Bank study shows that many employees desire family-friendly policies like flexible work and childcare, there is a disconnect with employer perceptions.

A key finding by the World Bank survey is that women often enter the labour market in their 20s but leave permanently by their 40s. Employers express hesitance about hiring women returning after a long absence due to concerns about cost and care responsibilities, such as the need to introduce lactation rooms and childcare facilities at the workplace.

There is a demand for support like tax exemptions and flexible work arrangements and this is a positive step, though many firms offer limited flexibility. Childcare facilities are scarce, leading to long wait times. The report emphasises that both men and women should share childcare duties to change the perception of childcare as solely a women's responsibility. Legislative support and evaluation of policies are also needed. Tax exemption is one support, while flexible work arrangements are viable options to encourage women to stay in the workplace. Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin pointed out 70% of workplace get demand from their employees to take them back – however, some firms face the challenge of being able to have workers only on-site due to the nature of the work in question, though she pointed out that the World Bank study found that work-from-home policy is not hard to implement.

Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin pointed to another significant barrier – that is who shoulders the childcaring responsibilities when parents are at work. Shared parenting, legislation change, tax incentives – all of these must be implemented to make sure that women do not lose out in the labour force, she concluded.

Discussion

The discussion mainly centred on brainstorming ideas on how to retain women in the workforce, with Ms. Emma Walsh saying that until recently, there has been no data in Australia on family-friendly policies. According to Dr. Christopher Choong Weng Wai, family-friendly policies are not at all family-friendly. Many women in Malaysia are vulnerable because the nature of their job is precarious, especially in work that does not fall under the Gender Employment Act.

Ms. Emma Walsh took the argument further by stating that creating family-friendly policies is not only a women's issue but involves men as well. Men should also be caregivers. It's accepted in society that women can work and contribute financially but also on the flip

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https://familyfriendlyworkplaces.com.au/benchmarking-assessment/?__hstc=170237345.475c2a6b8451b0ad7eba1a42951e45fe.1760090494204.1760090494204.1760090494204.1&__hssc=170237345.5.1760090494204&__hsfp=1365387419

side, men don't have that flexibility, and therefore it must be asked what men do in their free time. Financial incentives may not work for men.

It was pointed out by H.E Veronica that Indonesia provides care subsidies, including for its caretakers, child-caretakers and elderly caretakers – however, they do not want to be registered and formally trained, therefore the government is trying to simplify the administrative process so they can work, and channel their salary to their families. Often, the caregivers' money is depleted by the end of the month due to the lack of financial literacy.

It was also discussed that linking care work to increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) alone should not be the way, as it reduces care work to purely an economic tool, as well as risk alienating communities such as those with severe disabilities who cannot compete in the labour market on an equal level to their more abled peers.

However, as H.E Veronica pointed out, the challenge in Indonesia is women are put on certain expectations in order to justify their high salary. Indonesia's private sector will ultimately accept both maternity and paternity regulations as these policies are framed in terms of contributing to the GDP. Indonesia is trying to work with companies to make sure that the workers' families are included in their financial literacy efforts.

Ms. Emma said that Australia has become more progressive since a few years ago when they removed the labels 'maternity' and 'paternity' and replaced it with "parental leave" so that it applies to both women and men. Each person gets 12 weeks of leave when they have a baby. Now, more and more men are taking paid parental leave, soaring up to around 15% currently.

Q&A

A question was posed by an audience member who asked whether AI could be integrated into care work. Ms. Emma Walsh welcomed AI as productive as it can lower work hours and free time for parents, and that AI forces society to rethink what is truly important that needs to be done and what can be done without. H.E Veronica reiterated that AI can indeed be used to train caregivers.

A question was also asked on how to balance productivity with carework expectations, to which the panel answered that employer-employee trust is important. It was pointed out by Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin that employers can lead by example in catering to flexible work and that in some countries, flexible work is the norm.

An audience member asked whether the World Bank plans to research caregivers of people with disabilities and the elderly, to which Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin said yes.

In response to a question on how ASEAN can share best practices to address the needs of the ageing population, H.E Veronica emphasised ASEAN cooperation and that ASEAN countries must unite to speak up on it using a singular voice, and that grassroots work

must be done. Ms. Emma Walsh said that in Australia, there are certain quarters of people who oppose flexible work, making the issue of flexible work a contested one.

An audience member observed that in Kelantan, where she is from, women are forced to bring their babies to the wet market where they work, and asked how could this gap be closed. It was responded by Ms. Shakira Teh Sharifuddin who pointed to an important qualitative study by the World Bank on women in rural areas of Kelantan. The study found that women's work there is seen as just supplementary to their husband's income. Ms. Emma Walsh pointed out that all sorts of workers need to take a break no matter the gender; people return to work on a gradual basis and that the question is how can we apply a framework for not just the female returnees.

8. Closing Remarks of Day 1 by Sanja Saranovic, Deputy Representative, UNICEF

Ms. Sanja Saranovic from UNICEF thanked Wanita Berdaya Selangor and highlighted the importance of a whole-of-society approach to the care economy. She emphasised that gender equality is crucial for child rights and sustainable development.

Many young girls face discrimination, child marriage, and violence. These issues need urgent attention to prevent their negative effects on society. Access to health for girls and women benefits entire communities. UNICEF is dedicated to supporting girls' advancement and promoting family-friendly policies like paid leave. The goal is to empower children, ensuring their safety and nurturing environments, regardless of gender.

In her closing remarks further, Ms. Sanja Saranovic pointed out that girls globally face societal discrimination and structural barriers. Millions of girls are married, face sexual violence, and are cut off from healthcare and education. Women's political participation is also declining, and urgency is growing as our society is aging which is creating a generation of women who are caregivers, hence impacting women's career chances. Family-friendly policies are key, including paid leave, adequate wages and shared house chores and caring responsibilities. As a conclusion to her speech, Ms. Sanja Saranovic said that gender equality is a goal that cannot wait further.

Day 2 (29 August 2025)

9. Special Remarks by Dr. Julitta Onabanjo, UNFPA Representative Malaysia and UNFPA Country Director Thailand

Dr. Julitta Onabanjo expressed gratitude to WBS and the welfare women ministry for organising the first gender outlook forum, highlighting UNFPA's role in promoting universal access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). She emphasised the urgency of addressing maternal deaths, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and advancing gender equality, especially in the context of an aging society.

Dr. Julitta noted Malaysia's leadership role in ASEAN and its 30th year commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action. She stressed the need to achieve SDG5 by 2030, while acknowledging the challenges posed by societal norms, patriarchy, and cultural barriers. The emergence of technology-facilitated GBV was discussed as a growing issue that affects women's workplace participation, leading many to leave their careers.

UNFPA is working towards improving gender data systems to better understand and address these issues. This includes collecting gender-disaggregated data and conducting in-depth qualitative research. There is a call for a robust gender diagnostic study to enhance policy formulation. Dr. Julitta highlighted the importance of education in changing social norms and discussed initiatives aimed at rights literacy, especially for marginalised communities.

To support women in the workforce, UNFPA collaborates with private sector organisations to promote family-friendly policies. The conclusion reaffirmed UNFPA's commitment to help Malaysia and ASEAN realise the goals of the Beijing Platform, advocating for a society free of toxic norms and violence, where caregiving is a shared responsibility and economies are inclusive for all genders.

10. Keynote Address by H.E. Edmund Bon Tai Soon, Representative of Malaysia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)

H.E Edmund Bon Tai Soon, representing AICHR, discussed the need for promoting gender equality in Malaysia and across ASEAN. While ASEAN members have signed CEDAW, the implementation of women's rights remains slow. Many women live in poverty, face health risks, and are underrepresented in politics, particularly in rural areas where services are limited. Women engage in caregiving for an average of five hours per day, which hinders their economic participation. He stressed that gender equality is not just a women's issue, but a broader human rights and economic concern. Three main messages were highlighted: First, inclusivity and sustainability should address all people, including men, women, children, and vulnerable groups such as refugees, ensuring policies benefit everyone. Sustainability involves respecting both people and the planet. Second, AICHR is working to protect and advance the rights of women and children in ASEAN, promoting their involvement in community-building and participating in climate change initiatives. There is a commitment to eliminate gender-based violence (GBV) and develop a five-year work plan for sustainable development. Thirdly, national policies must support and complement ASEAN efforts, focusing on safety, decent work, and reducing barriers for women, particularly in rural areas. He emphasised the need for Malaysia to enact a gender equality law, noting that CEDAW calls for such action. Structural barriers for women, especially in rural settings, remain significant. A commitment to promoting women's potential and making strategic changes is crucial for progress. The AICHR team is ready to support these initiatives and looks forward to the outcomes of the forum.

11. Opening Speech by YAB Dato' Seri Amirudin Shari, Chief Minister of Selangor

The Chief Minister emphasised Selangor's commitment to gender equality and narrowing inequalities, guided by the principle that no one should be left behind. He stressed the need to shatter the glass ceiling, support women's leadership, and ensure that policies and initiatives reach the most vulnerable first. He also highlighted the importance of adapting global best practices to Malaysia's cultural context and noted that Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN provides a timely opportunity to advance regional gender equality. To achieve this, he underlined the value of building alliances beyond governments and recognising the interconnected issues of gender, environment, and economy.

Through WBS, the state has invested in women's leadership and political literacy, with the goal of strengthening both families and the economy. He pointed to recent successes, such as the mentoring of 500 women entrepreneurs whose businesses have seen significant revenue growth. Selangor is also expanding opportunities for women in technical fields, including aerospace through TIVET programmes, while simultaneously addressing structural barriers that keep women from advancing in the workforce. In particular, he acknowledged that the high costs of childcare and eldercare continue to hinder women's participation in the labor market, and he stressed the need to recognise care work as a fundamental part of the economy.

He further noted the importance of strengthening academia and its linkages with industry to help more women climb the career ladder. In concluding his speech, he positioned this forum as an opportunity to develop new horizons, gather ideas, and shape solutions on promoting gender equality by bringing together experts and stakeholders.

12. Collaboration Partnership Agreement (CPA) between Wanita Berdaya Selangor (WBS) and Parents at Work Australia

A Collaboration Partnership Agreement (CPA) between Wanita Berdaya Selangor (WBS) and Parents at Work Australia took place on stage, with WBS represented by YB Anfaal Saari and WBS CEO Puan Siti Faridah Abdul Samad while Parents at Work Australia was represented by CEO Ms. Emma Walsh. VVIPs were also invited to the stage. The exchange of the CPA symbolised the pledge to care-centred collaboration where work and family thrive by side.

13. Session 4: Power, Presence and Pushback: Women's Rights for Space

Panellists and Moderator:

- i. YB Teo Nie Ching, Deputy Minister of Communications and National Vice Chairman of Democratic Action Party (DAP)
- ii. YB Datuk Wira Mas Ermieyati binti Samsudin, Chairperson of Public Accounts Committee, Member of Parliament and Women Chief of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU)
- iii. YB Amira Aisya binti Abd Aziz, Acting President of Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) and Johor state assemblyperson
- iv. Mr. Ooi Kok Hin, Country Director of Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Malaysia (moderator)

“Seats at the Table: The Fight for Gender Quotas and Representation in Political Decision-Making” by YB Teo Nie Ching

The ongoing underrepresentation of women in politics globally and in Malaysia was underscored by YB Teo Nie Ching. Although women comprise about one-third of political party members worldwide, they remain excluded from key decision-making roles and are often assigned to “soft” portfolios such as welfare and women’s affairs instead of crucial sectors like finance or security. She contrasted this with education, where women dominate Malaysian universities, master’s, and PhD programmes while men often stop at diploma or degree levels. Despite this academic edge, women’s political participation remains stagnant—with only 30 out of 222 MPs ¹²in the Dewan Rakyat being women, the same number as when Teo entered Parliament in 2008 as one of its youngest MPs. YB Teo noted that DAP fares better than most parties, with 10 women among its 40 MPs. The full breakdown of the number of women in parliament can be found in the table she provided below:

Pakatan Harapan 15/81 (18.5%)	Barisan Nasional 3/30 (10%)	Perikatan Nasional 6/74 (8.1%)	Gabungan Parti Sarawak 5/23 (21.7%)
DAP 10/40 (25%)	UMNO 3/26 (11.5%)	PAS 5/43 (11.62%)	WARISAN 1/3rd (33%)
PKR 4/31 (12.9%)		BERSATU 1/31 (3.22%)	
AMANAH 1/8th (12.5%)			

Total: 30/222

¹²

https://library.kpwkm.gov.my/ELFinderConnector?cmd=file&target=v1_XEFSVEILRUwgQUtIQkFSXDIwMjRcRkVCXDI3IEZFQiAyMDI0XFdvbWVuJ3MgUmlnaHRzIEZlbnRhdGlzbiBVcmRlbnN5LnBkZg2&_t=1708996278#:~:text=Amid%20the%20charged%20atmosphere%20of,within%20the%20nation's%20political%20landscape.

She referred to DAP's internal gender quota in the March 2025 party elections as a successful example whereby 9 of 30 members that got elected were women, many of whom reached high ranks. DAP also plans to field 30 female candidates in the next General Election.

YB Teo concluded that inclusive representation strengthens policymaking legitimacy but warned that without strong party-level commitment, Malaysia is unlikely to see legally binding gender quotas in the near future.

“Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women Leading in Male-Dominated Political Arenas” by YB Datuk Wira Mas Ermieyati binti Samsudin

Datuk Wira Mas Ermieyati shared her personal journey in politics to demonstrate of how women can break through barriers in male-dominated arenas recalling initial warnings that politics was “not for women” and “not for the faint-hearted,” but empathising that it is possible for women to succeed and crack the glass ceiling. Unlike many others, she entered politics without family connections or political privilege. Her journey began unexpectedly in 2001, when as a young law graduate she signed up with Puteri UMNO at a supermarket booth. By 2002, she had become the pro tem chief of Puteri UMNO Alor Gajah, mentored by Tan Sri Abu Seman Yusop and Tun Ali Rustam, with whom she worked for seven years. She went on to serve three terms as the longest-serving chief of Puteri UMNO Malacca. As the first woman MP from Malacca, elected at the age of 37, she faced both gender and age bias. To counter this, she focused on hard work, building trust with the grassroots, and fostering a culture of teamwork that minimised protocol and red tape. Her community-oriented efforts such as providing hospital beds, diapers, and student support helped her demonstrate that women could effectively represent constituencies at every level.

Her career was not without challenges. After contesting against Jamilah Hanim Othman in 2013 and later facing political upheaval in 2018, she endured stigma, harassment, and depression, particularly when she left UMNO. She noted that women often face double judgment, and her departure was seen by many as a betrayal. This period tested her resilience, but also allowed her to redefine her political identity when she joined Bersatu, where she focused on mentoring women and youth in politics. She stressed that the glass ceiling is not only external, but also comes from internalised stigma and self-doubt. Her perseverance paid off. She won leadership roles in Bersatu, including as division chief, and just three days before polling day in 2022, she was announced as the Chief Minister candidate — another significant breaking of barriers. Ultimately, she secured victory in Masjid Tanah in 2022. As Chair of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), she made history as part of the first all-women leadership team with a female deputy chair, and she introduced reforms such as public hearings, linkages with state PACs, and study visits. She concluded with four lessons from her journey that women must lift each other up, preparation is the best antidote to prejudice, resilience is a daily choice, and visibility matters.

“When Politics Turns Hostile: Lived Realities of Women Facing Online Abuse in Political Space” by YB Amira Aisya binti Abd Aziz

YB Amira Aisya shared her personal journey to highlight the lived realities of women in politics, particularly the harassment and abuse she faced online. At 30 years old and with five years of political experience, she entered politics with the aim of championing better policies, reforms, climate action, and education. However, she was unprepared for the intensity of online harassment and the toll it took on her mental health. She emphasised that politics should be about ideas and vision, yet women are often attacked personally rather than engaged on their policies. She pointed out that women in politics remain an exception rather than the norm. While being “the first woman” to achieve certain milestones can be a source of pride, she noted that it is also a lonely label. Progress

would truly be seen when women's political representation becomes commonplace rather than exceptional. Globally, only 26.9% of MPs are women, and in Malaysia, the figure is just 14.9%, with some states having no women representatives at all. Many women are either discouraged from entering politics or pressured to leave due to the scale of abuse, threats, and harassment they face.

Citing an Inter-Parliamentary Union report, she noted that women in politics encounter harassment, face-to-face violence, and online violence, affecting women across all political parties. She illustrated this by showing tweets she regularly receives, many of which body-shame her or ridicule her even when she speaks on serious issues like the cost of living. These comments come not only from anonymous users or cybertroopers but also from male politicians. YB Amira also reflected on how society frames women politicians. She is often called an "iron lady," a label she finds uncomfortable, as it suggests she must be unbreakable to survive in politics. She shared that after lodging a police report about an abusive online comment, a fellow female politician criticised her, saying it made her look weak. There was also no follow-up from the police, underscoring institutional gaps in addressing online violence. For her, every insult is not only a personal attack but also a deterrent for other young women considering politics.

She explained that her decision to lodge the report was not only for herself but to create a safer path for future generations of women leaders. She emphasised that one does not need an "iron heart" to enter politics and what is truly needed is courage. She concluded by recognising the legacy of women before her who fought to create space in politics, and she is committed to ensuring that the women who come after her do not have to face the same battles.

Q&A session

A question was posed by Ms. Dara Waheeda (Advocacy, Legal Services & Research Manager at SIS Forum) who observed that many female MPs and ADUNs express disappointment that they were put in losing seats, and therefore how can a genuine and fair contest take place using concrete reforms, party processes and legal framework. This question was expanded by Mr. Ooi Kok Hin who asked what structural reforms can be done, citing the example of the UNDI18 initiative which successfully made Malaysians automatically eligible voters at the age of 18. He also pointed to the example of the cross-party caucus.

The question was answered by Ms. Amira who said that Gender-Based Violence (GBV) against female politicians must be recognised in Malaysian law, as has been done in Bolivia, and that severe penalties be imposed on perpetrators. It was further suggested that male politicians who commit GBV be held accountable through legislation rather than simple suspension. Examples were given from MUDA, where 50% of representatives are women, and calls were made for women to be included in major decision-making spaces and given winnable seats under gender quotas. It was further elaborated by Ms. Amira that she was contesting in the most winnable seat in the Johor state election (the Puteri Wangsa seat) under Pakatan Harapan where she witnessed YB Teo Nie Ching ferociously supporting for YB Marina to win a seat. According to Ms. Amira, this is a good example of women supporting women, and that candidate selection committees and negotiations are good platforms to push for greater female political participation. Often the only woman in the room, she herself has advocated and cheered for women from other political parties.

The question was also answered by YB Teo Nie Ching who said that DAP used to have a cross-political party women's caucus during her early days in parliament where female senators were invited to join as well. However she believes women's caucus do not function well as it is difficult and rare to see female MPs or female elected representatives to condemn issues such as discrimination against women, hence making cross-party cooperation impossible. Secondly, she said she had not done any analysis as to whether it is true that women are more prone to be put in non-winnable seats, but women must also not escape unpopular seats, citing her example in the 2008 elections where she was fielded in the parliamentary seat of Serdang (now called Bangi), a seat not having been won by DAP and was the stronghold for MCA. In 2004, MCA won the seat by a 10,000 majority, but in 2008, YB Teo Nie Ching won it by 20,000 majority. She also won in Kulai, Johor in 2008, a former MCA stronghold. Women therefore must be convinced that they can win the seats they contest in.

Also answering Ms. Dara Waheeda was Datuk Wira Mas Ermieyati who said that the 30% quota must be placed in the party-level itself first and that there must be a strong political will not just by female leaders but male leaders as well. In the upcoming Bersatu assembly, there would be an important announcement coming from the president via the women's wing and that the women's political agenda cannot be delayed further.

Another question was posed by an audience member who asked how to reconcile the call for women's greater political participation whilst Malaysian politics functions mostly on a race-based system which limits across gender, race and class. Datuk Wira Mas Ermieyati responded that this is no excuse and that there must be continuous engagement, as well as putting men in committees that support greater women's political participation. This can be seen in PAS where there is an increase in women compared to 10 years ago.

Another anonymous question asked about the pushback by women themselves against women's political participation. YB Teo Nie Ching responded that this does not really matter as women are free to take up their own political agenda, not just the women's political agenda, saying that she too felt that way during her early political days and did not call for greater women's political participation in parliament. However, nowadays she empowers her female officers and pushes for their participation in big political hallways, making sure that the higher ranking officers are women. Ms. Amira also responded, saying that during her 5 years she has been in politics, there have not been women who do not support her political participation. There are women who work cross party to work on women's empowerment and therefore it's high time to have cross-party caucus on women's issues such as in other countries. She concluded by saying that the issue of some women leaders being not supportive of other women in politics should not be dwelled upon.

14. Session 5: Embedding Gender-Inclusive Framework in Tech-Driven Sustainability

15. Panellists and Moderator:

- i. **Ms. Ili Nadiah Dzulfakar, Programme Director, Klima Action Malaysia (KAMY)**
- ii. **Ms Siti Kamariah Ahmad Subki, Trustee and Managing Director of Yayasan Hasanah**
- iii. **YBrs. Dr. Helmi Zakariah, Chief Executive Officer Hayat Technologies Sdn. Bhd.**
- iv. **Dr Farhana Abdul Fatah, Senior Lecturer, Gender Studies Programme, University of Malaya (moderator)**

“Demystifying Just Transition” by Ms. Ili Nadiah Dzulfakar

Ms. Ili Nadiah spoke on the importance of demystifying Just Transition (JT) as a key concept for driving sustainable and inclusive economic growth. She emphasised that when discussing climate action, the conversation often centres on disasters and extreme weather, but this overlooks how climate change shapes everyday life. Women, in particular, are both victims of its impacts and vital solution providers and knowledge holders. Yet, JT discourse is often narrowed to technology such as AI, solar power, or electric vehicles, without asking deeper questions: who has access to these technologies, who benefits from them, who is excluded, and who creates them in the first place.

In Malaysia, marginalised groups including women and the B40 poor are rarely heard in JT conversations. While Malaysia’s Madani framework and its commitment to net zero by 2050 highlight ambitions for a low-carbon, green economy, these aspirations do not automatically guarantee fairness, accountability, or justice. Ili highlighted that women should not only participate in but also help shape the green economy. However, there is currently no data linking women’s roles in JT with the care economy, leaving critical policy gaps unaddressed.

To illustrate how climate action intersects with social justice, she posed three questions to her audience:

1. How many have complained to their representatives about transport costs and accessibility, given that not everyone can afford electric vehicles?;
2. How many know women in government low-income housing (PPR) who struggle with high bills and rising heat, bearing the brunt of energy injustice?;
3. How many have spoken to informal workers about whether their jobs will be protected under the transition to a green economy?

These questions, she explained, show that JT cannot be treated as an abstract issue or viewed only through the lens of climate disasters. For Ms. Ili, climate action must also mean economic empowerment. Achieving a fair JT requires data collection, policy shifts, and budget allocations to support women and other marginalised groups. KAMY, as a feminist climate NGO, works towards this goal through four pillars: policy and advocacy, coalition building, empowerment, and diplomacy.

Yet Ms. Ili noted that very few spaces exist where women, especially those

in rural areas, feel able to talk about climate issues. Technical jargon often alienates them, preventing meaningful participation. The challenge, therefore, is not only to ensure gender parity in climate governance but also to transform women's lives, families, and communities through inclusive and just climate action.

“From Ground Zero to Global Policy: Women’s Role in Shaping Sustainable and Resilient Societies” by Ms. Siti Kamariah Ahmad Subki

Ms. Siti Kamariah shared her experiences in advancing women's roles in shaping sustainable and resilient societies. Reflecting on her journey with the WBS, she highlighted the pioneering rollout of gender-responsive budgeting at the state level, describing it as thought-provoking and bold since no other states had attempted such measures within their agencies. Penang, too, has demonstrated courage in adopting gender-responsive budgeting.

Through Yayasan Hasanah's over a thousand programmes, she stressed the importance of tracking gender-disaggregated data, a basic but often overlooked step. Malaysia's national statistics, for example, do not account for communities such as the Bajau, nor for women working in informal or home-based roles like sewing or child-rearing. Recognition and appreciation are essential, and sometimes all it takes is something as simple as using an Excel sheet to track the number of women reached and to ensure funding is properly channelled. She also noted that Indigenous women may not understand the technical concept of gender mainstreaming, but what matters is listening to communities and responding to their needs, such as ensuring wudhu' facilities are accessible, or providing prayer spaces that accommodate women living with disabilities.

She illustrated how women's contributions are often overlooked in times of crisis. During floods, for instance, more women serve as frontline helpers in flood centres, yet their role as first responders goes largely unacknowledged. Recognising these contributions, she argued, would fundamentally change how society views women's role in resilience-building. Although such concepts such as gender mainstreaming, resilience, social cohesion are often described in technical terms, she explained that at their heart they are simple: they are about listening to communities, understanding what people need, and acknowledging their contributions.

Social cohesion, she added, means finding ways for people to come together, collaborate, and support one another. Research and engagement at the grassroots level must also be accessible to people who cannot read or write, as well as inclusive of families and children. As an example, she described Yayasan Hasanah's partnership with Teman Malaysia, a project where people support vulnerable groups by helping with groceries, clinic visits, and daily needs. These initiatives, she concluded, show how women's roles that are often invisible are central to building sustainable and resilient societies.

“Tech for Well-Being: How Digital Access Shapes Health and Social Mobility” by YBr. Dr. Helmi Zakariah,

YBr. Dr. Helmi drew from his experience as a medical doctor in rural communities. 15 years ago, he recalled how dangerously entrenched biases shaped patient care. For example, it was quietly assumed that a pregnant woman with dengue would not survive, and while a woman with tuberculosis might be treated, a migrant woman with the same illness was often considered a “lost cause.” One of his early theses explored why tuberculosis patients delayed seeking care, and he found that systemic issues, such as TB clinics at Tengku Ampuan Rahimah Hospital being open only on Tuesdays from 8 to 5 which has created barriers to access. These examples illustrated how health inequities are built into the system.

Dr. Helmi argued that under patriarchy, the care system is already flawed, which is why technology must be harnessed to make healthcare more accessible and equitable. However, he stressed that technology should not only focus on access, but on outcomes. Currently, men use the internet more than women, with the gap especially pronounced in rural areas. This digital divide directly impacts women’s ability to access healthcare and, in turn, their social mobility. Integrating AI into the care economy, he suggested, could help overcome such systemic barriers.

He highlighted both local and global examples of technology improving health outcomes. In Malaysia, tackling child malnutrition and stunting has traditionally relied on nurses visiting low-income housing to check children. With digital tools, high-risk cases can be flagged earlier and more efficiently scaled. In the Dominican Republic, technology has even been used to forecast areas likely to experience domestic violence, allowing anti-violence services to be deployed proactively.

For women’s health in Malaysia, he pointed out how cultural barriers make Malay women less receptive to pap smears. Newer technologies like the HPV swab offer a less intrusive alternative, increasing participation rates. Programs like Selangor Saring, which provide screening access beyond standard weekday clinic hours, have since become a benchmark for cancer detection efforts.

Dr. Helmi also touched on financial empowerment, explaining how direct cash transfers are most effective when channelled directly to women. Evidence shows that when mothers or housewives receive financial support, they prioritise spending on children’s welfare and household needs, creating long-term benefits. However, he stressed that proper monitoring mechanisms must be in place to measure the impact and ensure accountability.

Finally, he emphasised the importance of designing technology with the end in mind and ensuring that it includes marginalised groups from the start. His own projects, he noted, are co-designed with women because women understand women’s problems. If used thoughtfully, AI can make healthcare systems more human, not less, by reducing bias, increasing equity, and amplifying women’s agency in health and social mobility.

Q&A session

Dr Farhana opened the Q&A session by pointing out that AI can help people to advocate for their own health. Women’s illnesses and worries are often disregarded by doctors, therefore AI is pivotal in changing this.

An unnamed member of the audience said that she believes technology is helpful but can be exploited and abused. She had read recently in the media about a

teenage boy who had been using ChatGPT and it made him unalive himself. Dr. Helmi said like all tools, AI can be a tool for good and bad, and there is a need for stronger safeguards, regulations, and public awareness to prevent abuse. Elaborating on the power of AI, Ms. Siti Kamariah said gender-disaggregated data be prompted on AI, for example on Indigenous communities. She advocates using AI to promote greater inquiry, thinking and solutions.

Meanwhile, the environmental and ethical costs of AI were emphasised by Ms. Ili Nadiyah. She said the production, maintenance, and disposal of technology, along with the vast water and energy consumption of data centres, were identified as critical sustainability issues. Without strict safeguards, these impacts could worsen the climate crisis and jeopardise efforts to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Questions were raised about whether sustaining massive data infrastructures should take precedence over protecting communities and the planet.

An audience member asked how Malaysia can upskill women in technology. Dr. Helmi said this could be done by giving women the opportunity to thrive in tech. In the field of epidemiology where he is in, women are already thriving in. In Thailand, those that take the blood sample of bats to predict bat disease are mostly women. Men have it easier because they have time, while women are at the caves. With funding from the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funding, most participants have been doctors, and 100% of them pass.

The question was also answered by Ms. Siti Kamariah who said the question is how to ensure women take this opportunity of upskilling whilst being able to care for their family. There are many job re-entry programs for women but women face structural barriers to enter the workforce.

The session concluded with a call for occupational safety and inclusivity in Malaysia's green and tech sectors. Concerns were expressed that the forthcoming Climate Change Bill does not adequately address the vulnerabilities of women, youth, and people with disabilities, and that greater inclusion and protection must be ensured as Malaysia moves toward a just and sustainable transition.

16. Session 6: Bridging the Digital Divide, Role of Media in Addressing GBV in Digital Access and Social Well-being

Panellists and Moderator:

- i. **Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh, Lecturer, Malaysia School of Arts & Social Sciences, Monash University**
- ii. **Ms. Mediha Mahmood, Chief Executive Officer, Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia**
- iii. **Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji, Independent Broadcast Journalist, Gender Equity Activist, Partner & Comms Director, The Big Picture (TBP) Communications**
- iv. **Ms. Siti Farhana Sheikh Yahya, News Anchor, AWANI (moderator)**

Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh, Lecturer, Malaysia School of Arts & Social Sciences, Monash University, “From Legislation to Inclusion: Ensuring Safe and Equitable Digital Spaces for All”

Dr. Benjamin began by examining bullying today, noting that legislation typically falls into two unhelpful categories: abstract and poorly defined, or specific but weak in enforcement. In Malaysia, a significant step forward was made with the recent amendments to anti-bullying legislation, passed in December 2024 and which came into effect in July 2025. These amendments provide clear and robust definitions of bullying, outlining the different harms it causes and specifying who can be charged including ringleaders and those who incite others to participate. Importantly, the law also criminalises doxxing, the act of searching for and leaking someone's personal information, a practice that remains unaddressed in most countries' legal frameworks.

Despite these advances, the gap between legislation and enforcement remains stark. Dr. Benjamin cited the case of Zarina Qairina, the first to test the anti-bullying law, which attracted national attention. Allegations of VVIP interference highlighted how power dynamics can undermine justice. In response, the government announced plans to train police and schools on anti-bullying measures, but Dr. Benjamin observed that this was a reactionary move, considering the amendments had already been introduced a year earlier. On paper, he noted, the law is strong, but its effectiveness is hindered by poor enforcement.

At the heart of the problem is how power dynamics shape both bullying and its redress. Perpetrators often target victims with little social value, emboldened by the knowledge that authorities may dismiss or ignore such cases. Victims, in turn, fear retaliation or blame if they come forward. Dr. Benjamin stressed that if the bullied belong to marginalised or invisible groups, the law often fails to protect them, as seen in numerous past cases. This reflects a deeper lack of intersectionality in policy enforcement. Without sensitivity training, many authorities continue to side with elites, perpetuating discrimination and failing to ensure justice.

For Dr. Benjamin, the challenge is not in the drafting of laws which in Malaysia's case are increasingly comprehensive but in ensuring that enforcement mechanisms recognise and address entrenched inequalities. Only by doing so can legislation move beyond paper promises to create genuinely safe and equitable digital spaces.

Ms. Mediha Mahmood, Chief Executive Officer, Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia, “Safe Spaces Online: Tracking Gender-Based Cyber Harassment”

Ms. Mediha began with a personal story. In 2020, after posting a viral tweet criticising the government—likening voting for it to returning to an ex—she became the target of a flood of sexist online abuse. Her experience illustrated how quickly women face gender-based attacks in digital spaces.

She explained the role of the Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia (CMCF), where she serves as Chief Executive Officer. Established in 1998 under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the CMCF was created to encourage internet growth through self-regulation. Its primary tool is the Content Code, a framework of governing standards and best practices for content dissemination in Malaysia's communications and multimedia industries.

The Content Code — written with strong input from women — covers issues such as incitement, hate speech, vitriol, and insensitive portrayals of violence. It provides a faster remedy for users, especially women and girls, to lodge complaints and seek redress. Ms. Mediha highlighted that while self-regulation works relatively well with broadcasters, it is much more challenging in the borderless world of the internet. She shared examples of how the complaints bureau operates. In one case, viewers objected to a sports news segment, claiming the female presenter's attire was lewd. The Content Forum clarified that content is only considered obscene if it is sexually depraved, corrupts youth, or pushes cultural boundaries, and therefore the complaint was not upheld. However, due to public backlash, the broadcaster still revised its dress code.

In another case in 2024, a television drama used gang rape as a promotional hook on social media, sparking outrage. The Content Forum intervened, ensured the post was taken down, and stopped the content from airing, showing that public complaints are taken seriously.

Looking ahead, Ms. Mediha warned of the “new age of sexism” powered by technology. Emerging threats such as deepfakes, cyber brothels, AI-generated sexual abuse, sex robots, and AI “girlfriends” create new avenues for degrading women and entrench dangerous social norms that could harm generations to come. She stressed that safe spaces are never accidental: they must be deliberately designed, agreed upon, and maintained. Only then can the digital world become safer and more equitable for women.

Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji, Independent Broadcast Journalist, Gender Equity Activist, Partner & Comms Director, The Big Picture (TBP) Communications, “Screens, Stories and Safety: The Media's Power to Transform Gendered Realities Online”

Ms. Tehmina spoke candidly about her own experiences with online abuse and Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), framing them within the broader failures of media systems. She argued that the media is not merely a mirror reflecting society but also an architect of power—its reporting shapes the way people view the world, whose pain is acknowledged, and who is held accountable. The critical question, she posed, is whether Malaysia's media systems are making society safer for women or instead entrenching existing fears and inequalities. She stressed that more media organisations must take safety for women seriously.

Drawing from the Reuters Digital News Report 2025, she pointed out how algorithms drive content before users even know what they want to see. A young boy joining TikTok, for instance, may be shown misogynistic content such as that of Andrew Tate, which then spills over into real-world behaviour—manifesting in classrooms where boys challenge teachers with expletives as seen in reality. The rise of creator-led alternative media and citizen journalism adds another layer of complexity, as up to 70% of such content is not fact-checked. This feeds into a broader crisis of news consumption and avoidance: 40% of people globally report avoiding the news because it leaves them feeling despair rather than empowered to act. In Malaysia, about 24% of those under 35 ignore the news, raising concerns not only for Generation Z but also for the upcoming Generation Alpha.

Ms. Tehmina called for journalism that explains complexity without dumbing it down, while also addressing deep-seated gender imbalances in reporting. Currently, women account for only 25% of news subjects or sources, and when they do appear, coverage is often episodic, sensationalised, or superficial. Men dominate as the main objects of reporting, while women are sidelined as notetakers or excluded entirely from spaces of decision-making. This reflects a wider pattern of patriarchal media framing and the prioritisation of viral, entertainment-driven content. To address this,

she argued, media organisations need more than responsibility—they must face penalties when they fail to uphold equitable practices.

She highlighted how the exclusion of underrepresented voices—rural women and girls, Indigenous peoples, and the poor—translates into their invisibility in policymaking. Without media visibility, policymakers feel little pressure to be accountable to these groups. Initiatives like the Al Jazeera Feminist Charter offer progressive steps in shifting media cultures.

Ms. Tehmina also connected TFGBV to broader economic and social harms. Cyberbullying is disproportionately targeted at women, often high-profile figures like female celebrities, but its effects also reach micro-entrepreneurs and small business owners who fear showing their faces online to market their work. Newer forms of abuse such as deepfakes intensify the problem; she cited a case in Johor where a 16-year-old boy spread doctored sexual images of his female schoolmates. These incidents demonstrate how technology is being weaponised against women and girls.

She concluded with a call to action: it is not enough to simply document or highlight problems. Media must pursue solutions-driven journalism, shifting from a content-centric to a change-centric model. With its immense influence, the media holds the power to shape safer and more equitable digital spaces—if only it chooses to act.

Q&A

The first question was asked by the moderator Ms. Siti Farhana Sheikh Yahya herself who posed the question to Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh on how legislation can be used for digital inclusion when there are many stumbling blocks such as in the case of Zara Qairina Mahathir who was bullied to death. She asked what are the gaps between policy and practice in ensuring digital inclusion, especially for the safety of women, girls and marginalised communities in Malaysia. Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh responded by saying that laws alone are insufficient to address bullying and gender-based violence when patriarchal attitudes persist among those enforcing them. Women who report abuse are often met with disbelief and victim-blaming rather than protection. A case was cited in which a Malaysian woman reporting *stealth*—the non-consensual removal of a condom—had her police report leaked online, leading to public harassment. This illustrated how institutional bias and mishandling continue to undermine justice for victims.

The second question, also by the moderator, was posed to Ms. Mediha who was asked what are the most pressing challenges in tackling Gender-Based Violence (GBV) including cyber violence. She was asked whether there were gaps in technology, lack of awareness, resistance from platforms, and how industry frameworks can be strengthened to overcome these challenges. Ms. Mediha Mahmood answered that it was all of the above, however it would take time to increase awareness. She believes that technology plays a big role in preventing harm from the very beginning. Safety must be put in place by default, for example putting the safe mode as the default mode in technology settings, thus reducing people's exposure to harmful content. Legislation for social media should also be implemented. Mitigating harm is the essence.

A question was posed by the moderator to Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji on what makes a story powerful. The response was that storytelling has a vital role in driving empathy and change. Stories about everyday sexism and political misogyny were said to be essential in challenging public indifference. Examples were given of Malaysian women politicians, including Dato' Seri Azalina Othman Said and Fadhlina Sidek, who faced public harassment. It was proposed that parliamentarians undergo gender-sensitisation training and that journalism continue to expose structural

inequities rather than isolated incidents.

A question was posed by Ms. Dara Waheeda (Advocacy, Legal Services & Research Manager at SIS Forum) to Ms. Mediha Mahmood whether the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) suing the public for defamation is the right course of action, to which Ms. Mediha Mahmood replied she was not the best person to answer as she was not privy to the defamation cases that they were pursuing. Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh answered by stating that Malaysian laws allow for criminal defamation where the government can sue people when there are defamations against state bodies and state entities, including royal entities. As a media scholar, however, he believes that criminal defamation should not be formulated as the state should be open to criticism for check and balance, and that he hopes parliamentarians will push to repeal this law, leaving only regular civil defamation available.

An anonymous question was posed asking whether there should be a push for laws on online sexual harassment and online sexual violence following the successful passing of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act. Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji responded saying there is a need to incorporate in the letter and the language CSAM (acronym for Child Sexual Abuse Material), citing the recent example in local news where a 12 year old girl was at the center of CSAM material but it was referred to as pornography instead. This, she said, is a mistake, as children cannot give consent. The CASM term should also be updated in the Child Act. This is in tandem with a deepfake law which Malaysia wants to enact, following the example of Denmark and following the surge of deepfakes happening in South Korea. Changes in legislation can also positively influence the treatment of female politicians in the upcoming state elections and national election in order to prevent violence against them. Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh added that the issue of consent is not properly understood by most people, and that consent can be revoked. Furthermore, police tend to blame women who try to seek help for the violence they face, dismissing it as '*suka sama suka*' (reciprocity/consent). Language therefore should not only be broadened to capture these types of nuances but there must also be sensitisation training for personnels such as the police and those who are stationed at one-stop centres.

Another anonymous question was posed on how to make platforms and perpetrators accountable for perpetrating violence, and how important are algorithm transparency when it comes to digital platforms. Ms. Mediha Mahmood replied that jurisdictions are looking into how algorithms work and the government is currently looking into that with the Online Safety Act, which will be unveiled at the end of this year. She believes that these algorithms should also be audited and proposes that they also be 'gender swapped' in order to see how they fare. Secondly, she stressed that algorithms can also be a force for good, such as in pushing for certain messaging. There are algorithms that can predict sexual harassment and cyberbullying content even before a user types it, therefore working with such platforms is vital. Ms. Tehmina Kaoosji, meanwhile, pointed that awareness exists, but there is a lack of collaboration between ASEAN countries despite there being 300 million youths in ASEAN under the age of 35. Consumer power is therefore vital in pushback against platforms such as the AI Chatbot by Meta which allows hypersexualised conversations with children under 12, and which is portrayed as a scantily-clad female. There was an instance of a 16 year old boy who died of suicide caused by his conversations with ChatGPT. Blocks of nations must therefore come together to push for greater accountability amongst technology companies.

Another anonymous question that was posed was how technology pushes for gendered content and how can these gaps be fixed to promote gender equality. It was responded to by Dr. Benjamin Yeoh YH Loh who credits algorithms for bringing non-technologically savvy people into cyberspace, therefore getting rid of algorithms is not the solution, but the pressure should be on technology companies on the content that they push out, which is what neighbouring countries are trying to do. He

concluded by saying that he does not agree with Malaysia's decision to license the internet, and calls for more sophisticated initiatives such as pressuring technology companies for greater accountability.

The session was summarised by Ms. Siti Farhana Sheikh Yahya who concluded that in order to tackle online Gender-Based Violence (GBV), there must be changes in laws, policies and cultural attitudes, as well as industry accountability and the power of storytelling to shift perception.

17. Session 7: The Legal Architecture of Gender Rights and Mechanism

Panellists and Moderator:

- i. **H.E. Edmund Bon Tai Soon, Representative of Malaysia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)**
- ii. **Ms. Melissa Mohd Akhir, Commissioner of The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM)**
- iii. **YBhg. Prof. Dato' Dr. Noraida binti Endut, Professor at Unit Research of Women and Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia (Moderator)**

H.E. Edmund Bon Tai Soon, Representative of Malaysia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), "From inspiration to Action: Assessing the effectiveness of ASEAN's Legal Frameworks on Gender Equality"

H.E Edmund spoke about the legal architecture in Malaysia and the gaps that exist in protecting women's rights and addressing gender discrimination. He explained that while there are constitutional provisions, Malaysia still lacks a specific anti-discrimination or gender-equality law. One of the landmark cases in this area was the Noorfadilla case¹³, which established that refusing to hire a woman due to pregnancy is unconstitutional gender discrimination under Malaysia's Federal Constitution.

He recalled his personal experience in handling the case. Years ago, Ms. Noorfadilla applied to become a part-time teacher under the Ministry of Education. Before her appointment was confirmed, the officials asked the applicants if any of them were pregnant. This, H.E Edmund stressed, was an irrelevant question and a violation of rights, similar to asking if a candidate owned a car as a condition of employment.

When Noorfadilla admitted that she was a few months pregnant, her confirmation letter was withdrawn. She and her husband came to Edmund, who initially felt there was little hope since Malaysian law did not explicitly provide legal equality. However, after much pressure, he and his team decided to take the case on a pro bono basis. They relied on loopholes in the law, including the fact that Malaysia had signed

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<https://www.malaysianbar.org.my/article/news/legal-and-general-news/legal-news/noorfadilla-case-triumph-and-tribulations>

CEDAW and that an amendment to Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution¹⁴ (which had successfully been lobbied by then Minister of Women Tan Sri Shahrizat binti Abdul Jalil) could be interpreted to cover gender discrimination. Although the government argued otherwise, the Shah Alam High Court ruled in Noorfadilla's favour. It was the first case in Malaysia where the courts interpreted pregnancy-based discrimination as gender discrimination, and she was awarded damages.

Three years later, another case involving AirAsia raised similar issues. A woman offered a training contract was told that if she became pregnant, AirAsia could terminate her. This, too, was a form of discrimination. However, since the Constitution only applies to government bodies, and Noorfadilla's case had been against the government, Article 8(2) could not be applied to private companies like AirAsia. This revealed a major gap in the law: women in the private sector could still be discriminated against if they became pregnant.

H.E Edmund argued that what Malaysia needs is a new gender-equality law that applies to both public and private sectors. Furthermore, there should be a clear and accessible mechanism for women or survivors of gender inequality and violence to bring complaints to court. The Noorfadilla case took eight years, and not everyone has the money, resources, or stamina to endure such a process. He suggested the creation of a separate tribunal to handle straightforward cases, such as when mothers are discriminated against for having caregiving responsibilities. Mediation should also be considered as a viable option, given that the court system is currently overloaded and H.E Edmund himself has cases scheduled up until 2027 because of the shortage of judges.

Beyond workplace discrimination, H.E Edmund stressed the need to protect the care economy. This sector is crucial to family and societal wellbeing, yet it is often informal and undervalued. He called for recognition of care work as formal labour, with fair pay, benefits, and protections.

He also raised the issue of older persons' rights. When working on the right to development in ASEAN, H.E Edmund noted that many still viewed older persons primarily as recipients of charity. By contrast, Africa had, since 2015, already recognised the human rights of older persons. In Malaysia, the elderly are not yet seen in this light, and they remain vulnerable to intersectional injustices such as ageism, poor healthcare, and discrimination. These challenges are even more pronounced for elderly women, who face multiple layers of disadvantage. H.E Edmund argued that protecting older persons from discrimination and ensuring healthcare coverage and disability benefits must be part of Malaysia's broader framework for human rights and gender equality.

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<https://www.sprm.gov.my/admin/files/sprm/assets/pdf/penguatkuasaan/perlembagaan-persekutuan-bi.pdf>

Melissa Mohd Akhir, Commissioner of The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), “International Treaties and Commitments: Aligning National Laws with Global Gender Standards”

Ms. Melissa spoke on how the law is not neutral—whether in writing or in practice—as it often serves to reinforce power, privilege, and even intersectional oppression. She stressed that legal frameworks must advance human rights, substantive equality, and gender justice, rather than operate as acts of charity. Malaysia signed CEDAW in 1995, yet many gaps remain. For instance, Article 8 of the Federal Constitution provides for equality before the law but makes no mention of age or disability, and proposals to address this have faced resistance. In past cases, judges have interpreted the law broadly, such as in Suriani Kempe’s case where Justice Nantha Balan affirmed that “human” must include women.

Ms. Melissa outlined three dimensions of reform: substance (laws on paper), structures and mechanisms, and cultural and social norms. Even in states like Selangor, where domestic violence laws are more advanced, victim-blaming and structural barriers undermine their effectiveness. Many cases are discharged, and women often withdraw reports in exchange for child support. She highlighted that more women in Malaysia are killed by men than by cancer, underscoring the urgent need for consistent standard procedures tied to gender indicators and for challenging entrenched patriarchal norms.

The Indira Gandhi case ¹⁵ was cited as an example of judicial good practice aligned with CEDAW, where the Federal Court ruled that both parents’ consent is required for a child’s conversion to Islam. Yet Ms. Melissa questioned the mechanisms for enforcing children’s rights in such cases, noting that Indira Gandhi has still not been reunited with her children. She also drew attention to the experiences of minorities facing discrimination by language, religion, or ethnicity, and pointed to CEDAW’s concern with Indigenous Peoples’ right to land. Harmful practices such as child marriage—where even 12-year-olds may be wed—remain prevalent, while female genital mutilation, especially in medicalised form, is widespread in Malaysia compared to other Muslim-majority countries. Polygamy too was noted to have harmful effects on women and children.

Ms. Melissa credited organisations like Empower, Bersih, and the Association of Women Lawyers (AWL) for their advocacy around CEDAW, particularly on women’s low political participation. While Selangor has taken steps forward, including with quotas, and organisations such as Empower are proposing a 30% quota to be introduced into the bill, she emphasised that the quota is only a beginning, not the end. She called for the introduction of quotas into legislation as a structural measure to advance gender equality.

Q&A

The first question was initiated by YBhg. Prof. Dato’ Dr. Noraida binti Endut who asked how hard it was to reconcile national laws with CEDAW. H.E Edmund responded that rectifying CEDAW in full without reservations is a government responsibility, adding that a gender equality law should also be enacted. He elaborated that he had been asking KPWKM regarding the CEDAW reservations since 2016 but was told it was impossible due to cultural sensitivities. He added that

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<https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/constitutional-landmark-judgments-in-the-commonwealth/2019/12/12/indira-gandhi-v-pengarah-jabatan-agama-islam-perak-2018-landmark-case-in-malaysia-1>

SUHAKAM may be more privy to this.

It was added by Ms. Melissa that women's rights is not a Western construct, but a matter of universal values. The legal drafters on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are from Asia itself such as India, therefore this is a good opportunity to relook at the reservations. She pointed out that KPWKM has a high-level taskforce. In cases of intimate partner violence, women die, therefore we need to match the lived realities of women's lives and what's in the law.

A question was posed by Ms. Rusni Tajari (Senior Manager, Strategy and Policy, WBS) on how can Malaysia strengthen its accountability mechanism for greater gender equality, e.g. in cases of child marriage, Malaysia can use the UN child rights treaty. It was replied by H.E Edmund that this issue of accountability has been raised over and over again. Malaysia signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) for full pledged protections. However, he suspects KPWKM is below capacity or has no political will. It is his opinion that Malaysia's Child Act is not up to the standards of the child rights convention. Meanwhile, there are disputes and reservations to Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (PWD Act 2008) which does not allow people to sue. However, Dr Azalina Othman has been successful in pushing the National Action Plan because there's political will and the people that surround her were supportive. That said, in the 13th Malaysia Plan, women were categorised as building happy homes and were seen as supporting men in being leaders, rather than being leaders themselves, which is a worrying language reflecting gender stereotypes. Meanwhile, it was stated by Ms. Melissa that Projek 30% by organisations such as Empower are pressuring to include in the bill for a 30% women in politics quota in time for the next General Elections. She believes that now is the time for the law to be mandatory, and it must also be practised by political parties. She applauded that bullying is now recognised in the law. At the end of the day, she pointed out that culture affects laws. Moreover, people living in rural areas must be included in policy-making, and that legal mechanisms must match local realities, and cut across all courts including small courts.

A question was posed by an audience member who asked whether the law should have been followed if in the Air Asia case stated that stewardesses cannot not only get pregnant, but not get married as well. It was responded to by H.E Edmund who said that the court can strike it down even if it is in the contract. Therefore in the Air Asia cas, he said, should have been tested into the highest court to set a precedence.

It was stated by Ms. Omna Sreeni Ong that when there is political will, gender equality is possible. For example, in Malaysia, efforts started with the Gender Equality Bill and put aside for the Sexual Harassment Bill. The Sexual Harassment Bill was made possible by the civil society. KPWKM, she believes, must be assured, and not pressured.

The session was wrapped up by Ms. Melissa and H.E Edmund. Ms. Melissa said that Malaysia should leverage on the remaining time that it has for SDG 5 and get things moving with ASEAN, and that the country is not starting from scratch in order to achieve SDG5. H.E Edmund concluded that Malaysia must have bureaus for people to complain about gender inequalities, so they can be forwarded to SUHAKAM by lawyers. States, such as the Pusat Bantuan Penguaman, can be a channel for that in order to not overburden the national government with cases.

18. Critical Findings and Calls to Action - Mapping the Path Ahead by Puan Siti Faridah Abdul Samad, Chief Executive Officer, WBS

In her closing speech, Puan Siti Faridah thanked participants and reflected on the systemic challenges and biases that continue to hold women back. She emphasised the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives from the grassroots level up to national policymaking, ensuring equal governance in Malaysia, and improving civic education. She called for efforts to banish stereotypes, build environments where women can lead and thrive, and recognise the disproportionate unpaid care work women carry. She called upon all governments in ASEAN, political parties, stakeholders, and agencies to commit to the following:

- **Institutionalise gender-mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting** in all governance. This requires reliable sex-disaggregated data to reveal real gaps, track progress, and design effective policies. Governments must lead by building capacity across ministries, strengthening women's participation in leadership and parliament.
- **Dismantle barriers to women's representation** by adopting inclusive policies, enforcing protective measures, and ensuring zero tolerance for harassment. Civic education must challenge stereotypes and normalise women's leadership. Political parties, parliament, and state assemblies should create environments where women can lead with confidence and respect.
- **Invest in care infrastructure** by recognising unpaid care work as a vital economic driver. Women spend three times more hours on care than men, limiting their economic opportunities. ASEAN leaders must prioritise childcare, eldercare, and family-friendly policies to enable greater workforce participation for women.
- **Close the digital divide and foster women's role in green and tech-driven solutions.** Women face barriers to digital access, online harassment, and underrepresentation in technology and climate action. Strategies for digital inclusion and resilience must center on gender considerations.
- **Align national laws with global conventions such as CEDAW and ILO standards.** Laws must reduce gender gaps in harassment, land rights, inheritance, and political participation, while reflecting intersectionality to protect marginalised women across disability, ethnicity, and socio-economic lines.

She wrapped up by saying this forum is not the end, but the beginning of a collective journey toward equal governance, inclusive policies, and a future where women can thrive and lead at every level.

19. Closing Remarks by YB Anfaal Saari, Selangor State Executive Councillor of Women Empowerment and Social Welfare

The closing remarks summarised the forum's collective commitment to advancing gender equality and building inclusive, resilient societies. The key points reflected a holistic agenda spanning governance, care systems, political participation, and regional cooperation.

Discussions on gender mainstreaming and data systems underscored the need to institutionalise gender-responsive budgeting and appoint empowered gender focal points. Strengthening data systems disaggregated by sex, age, disability, and geography was identified as essential to accountability, captured by the message: *"No data, no accountability."*

On women's political representation, participants agreed that progress must go beyond quotas to ensure safety, resources, mentorship, and family-friendly political environments. Political parties were urged to embed internal targets, invest in candidate training, and enforce zero tolerance for gender-based violence in politics.

The section on reimagining care systems framed care as a shared public good and an economic driver. Investments in childcare, eldercare, respite services, and home-based care were called for, alongside formal recognition of unpaid work. Selangor's Care Economy Policy was cited as an affirmation that care is both work and worthy of value.

For ASEAN collaboration, the emphasis was on moving from ad-hoc projects toward sustained, replicable frameworks with shared benchmarks. Key areas for cooperation include gender-responsive budgeting, safe migration, social protection, and crisis response.

Addressing power, presence, and pushback in politics, the remarks highlighted the need to confront online abuse, gatekeeping, and double standards faced by women leaders. Strengthening party rules, harassment response mechanisms, and protective coalitions were proposed as concrete steps.

The discussion on embedding gender in green and tech-driven transitions called for ensuring women's inclusion in climate and digital economies. This involves integrating gender analysis, inclusive design, and targeted skilling opportunities for women and girls.

Under bridging the digital divide and media responsibility, the focus was on improving connectivity, literacy, affordability, and online safety. The remarks also called for survivor-centred reporting, platform accountability, and newsroom standards that reject victim-blaming.

For legal architecture and redress, the call was to translate rights into real protection through enforceable laws, trauma-informed services, accessible legal aid, and one-stop mechanisms for survivors.

In closing, it was affirmed that for Selangor, the forum represents a beginning rather than an end. Through the Selangor Women's Policy & Action Plan (2024–2026) and the Selangor Care Economy Policy (2024–2030), the state commits to investing in care infrastructure, mainstreaming gender perspectives across all policies, developing reliable gender-disaggregated data, and strengthening women's leadership in politics, business, and community life.

The final message was one of determination: the journey ahead will be challenging, but with shared commitments, clear timelines, and strong partnerships, a future can be built across Selangor, Malaysia, and ASEAN where care is valued, leadership is shared, and inclusion becomes a collective strength.

20. Poster Presentation

A poster presentation was held on the sidelines of the forum. Various participants submitted their posters based on the themes below.

Theme 1: Policy and Governance for Gender Equality

Theme 2: Violence Against Women in Politics and Leadership

Theme 3: Social Inclusion and Community Engagement

Theme 4: Economic Empowerment and Care Economy

Theme 5: Legal Framework in Gender Equality

Theme 6: Climate Change, Green Sustainability and Technology