

The Influence of Women in Political Leadership in Malaysia: Implications for Governance and Social Sustainability

Nik Fauziliano Mohd Tamizi¹, Siti Darwinda Mohamed Pero²

Abstract

This study explores the impact of women's participation in political leadership in Malaysia and its implications for governance and social sustainability. Despite women comprising nearly half of the population and registered voters, their representation in politics remains limited, falling short of the 30% target outlined in national and international commitments. Using a qualitative approach, the study collected primary data through interviews with politicians, academics, and NGO representatives, complemented by secondary data from official documents, policy reports, academic publications, and media sources. The findings show that women's involvement enhances transparency, integrity, and accountability in governance. Additionally, women broaden policy priorities by addressing social issues such as family welfare, mental health, and the rights of vulnerable groups, which are often overlooked in traditional policymaking. However, cultural patriarchy, internal party barriers, and the lack of legally mandated gender quotas remain significant challenges. To address these, the study recommends legal enforcement of a 30% gender quota, expansion of leadership development programs for women, and improved institutional support. These measures aim to ensure more balanced and effective political participation by women. The study's findings are expected to support the development of inclusive policies and strengthen democratic governance in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Women's participation, political leadership, governance, social sustainability, inclusive policy.*

Introduction

The issue of women's participation in politics has long been debated within the frameworks of human rights, development, and democratic governance. In Malaysia, although women make up nearly half of the population and workforce, their representation in political leadership has yet to reflect this demographic reality (Election Commission of Malaysia, 2023). This article examines how the involvement of women in political leadership not only improves the quality of governance but also contributes to long-term social sustainability through more inclusive, ethical, and community-oriented approaches.

A nationwide study by Ummu Zakuan (2023) shows that women in Malaysian political parties encounter layered barriers, including gender stereotypes, male dominance within party structures, and traditional role constraints as wives and mothers. Drawing on a survey of 109 female respondents across 20 parties, the study recommends three key accelerators for women's leadership: enacting binding quota legislation, strengthening women's wings/agencies, and instituting party structural and policy reforms. These findings align with Feminist Theory on patriarchal constraints and with Political Representation Theory, which underscores the role of institutional interventions (e.g., quotas) in advancing women's descriptive and substantive representation.

Meanwhile, a study by Maizura Meor Zawawi et al. (2023) explored the relationship between gender diversity on the boards of listed companies in Malaysia and their environmental, social, and governance

¹ School of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia Email: nikfauziliano@uum.edu.my.

² School of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia Email: darwinda@uum.edu.my.

(ESG) performance. The findings indicated that the presence of women on corporate boards enhanced transparency, accountability, and ESG performance. However, ESG disclosure levels in Malaysia remain low, with only 11.64% of listed companies demonstrating good sustainability practices in 2020. Another study by Ramachandaran et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of educational strategies in empowering women for leadership roles in Malaysia's corporate sector. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study identified six effective strategies, including leadership development programs, mentorship by female leaders, gender diversity initiatives, and professional skills development programs. These strategies contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 4.

Additionally, Research by Noraini Mohd Noor and colleagues (2020) underscores the strengths of Malaysian women's leadership in localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within their communities. Although many hold traditional organisational roles (e.g., secretarial or administrative posts), they display strong commitment to the SDG agenda and play a vital role in enhancing community well-being through grassroots coordination, community empowerment, and improved delivery of social services. These findings affirm women's positive contributions to governance (transparency, accountability, welfare orientation) and social sustainability. Nonetheless, achieving balanced and meaningful participation requires integrated measures, including supportive policy design, systematic leadership development, and structural-cultural reforms within political parties to reduce tokenism and patriarchal gatekeeping.

Women's Leadership in Malaysian Politics: An Overview

The history of women's involvement in Malaysian politics dates back to the pre-independence era, yet their roles have often been marginalized in mainstream narratives. As of the 15th General Election in 2022, only 30 women were elected as Members of Parliament out of 222 contested seats, representing just about 13.5% (Election Commission of Malaysia, 2023). This achievement remains far below the minimum 30% target set in the National Policy for Women's Development 2019–2025, in line with Malaysia's commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Despite women constituting more than half of the registered voter base and having made significant contributions to the independence movement and national development, their presence in top policymaking positions remains limited. The contributions of pioneering women figures such as Tun Fatimah Hashim, Shamsiah Fakeh, Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, and others deserve recognition as agents of change. However, their legacies are often underrepresented in national political discourse. Deeply rooted patriarchal structures within the local political culture continue to be the main barriers preventing women from advancing to the highest levels of leadership. These challenges are compounded by gender stereotypes, financial constraints, and the lack of female appointments to strategic party positions. Thus, efforts to achieve gender balance in Malaysian politics still require stronger commitments and more systematic reforms.

Patriarchal culture, structural imbalances within political parties, and social and economic constraints are among the primary barriers to women's participation (Mohamad & Mazlan, 2018). Nonetheless, the increasing number of women in grassroots leadership and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) signals potential for transforming Malaysia's political landscape towards greater gender responsiveness. Malaysia has yet to achieve the 30% target for women's participation in politics, as recommended by the United Nations (UN Women, 2022). In the 15th General Election (GE15), only 30 women succeeded in becoming Members of Parliament out of 222 seats (Malaysian Parliament, 2023), representing only 13.5%. While this marks progress compared to previous decades, the advancement has been gradual. Since independence, prominent women leaders such as Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and YB Hannah Yeoh have demonstrated women's capability in leading key ministries and advocating policies aimed at public welfare. A study

by Noraini Mohd Noor (2019) showed that the presence of women in the cabinet has influenced social policies such as child protection, gender equality, and family well-being.

In Malaysia, although women constitute nearly half of the population, their representation in political leadership remains significantly lower than that of men. This imbalance not only reflects a power gap within the social structure but also potentially undermines the effectiveness of governance and the achievement of social sustainability. This study aims to explore how gender dynamics influence women's participation and positions in political leadership in Malaysia and to link their impact to governance and sustainable national development. Globally, despite women's increasing importance and recognition in various sectors, data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in 2023 indicate that women remain underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide. There are only 31 countries where women serve as heads of state or government. Globally, women make up 26.5% of parliamentarians, and one in four cabinet ministers is a woman (22.8%). Women typically lead portfolios related to human rights, gender equality, and social protection, while men dominate areas such as defense and the economy (IPU & UN Women, 2023).

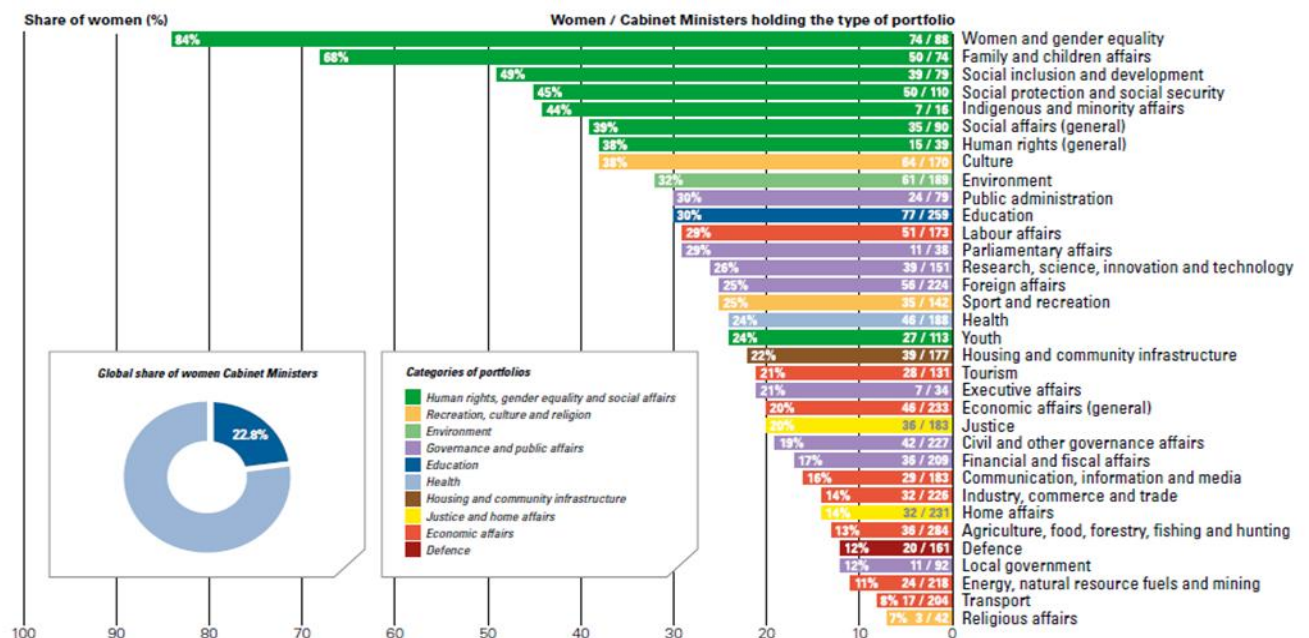


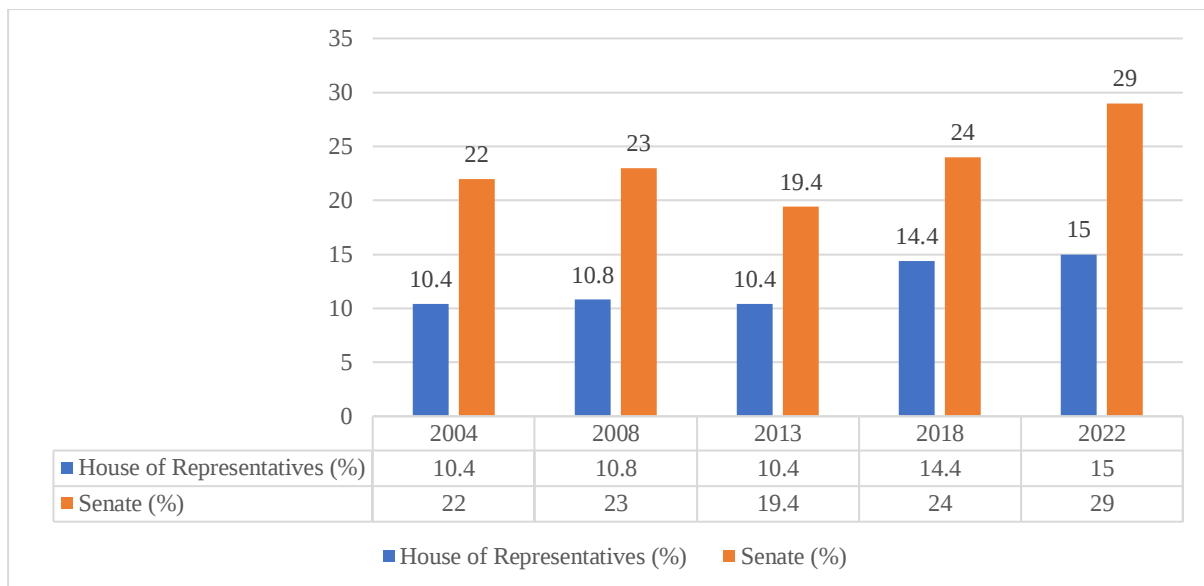
Figure 1: The Position of Women in Cabinets Worldwide

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2023

Based on Figure 1, it is evident that women around the world are still entrusted with limited leadership over key cabinet portfolios, such as finance, security, defense, and the economy. This highlights that despite the widespread adoption of democratic systems in many countries, women's participation in top policymaking positions remains far from balanced. Genuine democracy should provide fair opportunities for all segments of society, regardless of gender. However, the reality shows that in most countries including Malaysia gender parity in political leadership has yet to be achieved.

According to Kartini Aboo Talib et al. (2021), the active participation of women in politics is not only crucial for strengthening democracy but also serves as a key element in ensuring that policies truly represent the diversity of society. Women bring unique perspectives that can enrich policymaking processes by addressing the needs of marginalized groups who are often overlooked. Without balanced

female representation, the voices and interests of half the nation's population will continue to be sidelined.



Graph 1: Women's Political Participation in Malaysia
Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2023

This graph presents the percentage of women's representation in Malaysia's two main legislative bodies, namely the House of Representatives and the Senate, over five election cycles from 2004 to 2022. The data was obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2023). This analysis aims to evaluate the progression of women's participation in the legislative arena over the specified period. Women's representation in the House of Representatives has shown moderate growth. In 2004, women held 10.4% of the seats, which slightly increased to 10.8% in 2008. However, no progress was recorded in 2013, as the percentage remained stagnant at 10.4%. A more significant increase occurred in 2018, rising to 14.4%, followed by a further increase to 15% in 2022. Overall, the net increase over the 18-year period was 4.6%. In contrast, women's representation in the Senate was consistently higher than in the House of Representatives throughout the period. It began at 22% in 2004, rising slightly to 23% in 2008. However, a decline to 19.4% was observed in 2013. This was followed by a rebound to 24% in 2018, and a further increase to 29% in 2022. Overall, the net increase in women's representation in the Senate from 2004 to 2022 was 7%.

Despite these gains, women's political participation in Malaysia remains at a concerning level, especially when contrasted with the country's high achievements in women's education and health. This discrepancy is reflected in the Malaysia Gender Gap Index 2023, which recorded the political empowerment sub-index for women at just 9.6% significantly lower than the achievements in education and health, both of which exceeded 95% (Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy, 2024). This situation highlights a persistent gap in efforts to strengthen women's representation at policymaking levels in Malaysia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to deeply explore the factors influencing women's participation in politics in Malaysia. This approach was chosen as it is well-suited to capturing the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by women in the political arena, aspects that are often not adequately captured through quantitative methods (Okpe, Othman & Osman, 2021).

Data for this study collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, allowing the researchers to obtain more detailed and flexible information based on the respondents' insights. Two types of data were used in this study: primary and secondary data. Primary data were gathered through interviews with three main categories of informants. The first category consisted of active political figures, including political party members, both female and male Members of Parliament, and government officials involved in women's development and political policy. These interviews aimed to obtain personal perspectives on the challenges, opportunities, and forms of support available for women in politics. The second category included academic experts and researchers specializing in gender studies, politics, and public administration, who provided scholarly analyses and professional insights. The third category involved representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocating for women's rights and directly engaged in women's leadership development programs and gender equality advocacy in politics.

Secondary data were collected by analyzing official government documents, political party annual reports, policy papers, journal articles, books, media reports, and NGO publications related to women's political participation. This analysis also covered reports from the Election Commission of Malaysia, gender equality policies, election campaign reports, and women's participation statistics from general elections. The use of secondary data served to support and validate findings from the interviews, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the issues studied. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of diverse backgrounds and experiences relevant to the research topic (Ummu Zakuan, 2023).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. This process involved several stages, including reading and understanding interview transcripts, coding the data, identifying key themes, and synthesizing findings based on recurring themes. This analysis aimed to identify patterns related to the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in politics, including cultural barriers, social structures, the role of political parties, and the types of support available. To enhance the validity and reliability of the study, data triangulation was used by comparing information from primary and secondary sources. This step was essential to ensure that the findings were consistent and verifiable across different sources. Peer debriefing and member checking were also conducted to minimize researcher bias and enhance the accuracy of the findings. Overall, this methodology was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's political participation in Malaysia. By employing a qualitative approach and thematic analysis guided by appropriate theoretical frameworks, this study aims to contribute to the development of new knowledge in the fields of gender and politics and to provide practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders working to empower women in the nation's political arena.

Research Findings and Discussion

Women's Leadership Positively Impacts Governance

The study's findings indicate that women's participation in politics contributes positively to improving transparency, accountability, and integrity in governance. Women are perceived as being more ethical and meticulous in decision-making and are less likely to engage in unhealthy political practices such as patronage and abuse of power. The presence of women in political institutions is also associated with efforts to strengthen policies that are more transparent and oriented toward public interests.

Women's Participation Cultivates Transparent and Ethical Leadership

The study found that women in politics are often associated with more ethical, transparent, and accountable leadership. In Malaysia, figures such as Maria Chin Abdullah exemplify female leadership committed to institutional reform and human rights. She gained prominence through civil society movements like BERSIH before being elected as a Member of Parliament, where she continued to champion accountability and transparency in public administration.

According to an academic expert in governance and public policy interviewed for this study, such a leadership approach reflects a participatory governance model that bridges institutional decision-making with community needs. By prioritising open dialogue, multi-stakeholder engagement, and policy co-creation, women leaders can mobilise diverse actors to address complex societal challenges more effectively. The expert emphasised that, in Malaysia, this style of leadership has proven particularly valuable in tackling multi-dimensional issues such as poverty alleviation, disaster preparedness, and public health awareness. These strengths are rooted in women leaders' greater tendency to integrate empathy-driven decision-making with strategic assertiveness, thereby aligning closely with the transformational leadership paradigm outlined by Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2024)

"The presence of women in administration brings a new dimension to national leadership because they are more sensitive to integrity issues and consistently emphasize transparency in all administrative affairs. This is evident when women in senior positions show the courage to speak out on the need for institutional reform and the fight against corruption" (Informant 3, 2023).

The informant added that women's careful and deliberate approach to decision-making makes them valuable assets in efforts to strengthen transparency and accountability in the public administration system. Such leadership not only reinforces social policies but also enhances public trust in government institutions, which are seen as more caring and responsible. One informant from a women's NGO stated,

"Women tend to view leadership not merely as a matter of power, but as a moral responsibility to protect and defend the rights of society. In our experience, women leaders are more open to cross-sector collaboration and often invite NGOs to participate in the policy formulation process" (Informant 5, 2022).

This openness improves the transparency of policy processes and ensures that the voices of the public, particularly those of marginalized groups, are heard directly. Another informant, a female politician, remarked,

"There is tremendous pressure on women in politics to prove their capabilities and integrity, which makes many of us more cautious in our decision-making. However, this pressure also instills a form of political discipline that makes us more focused on public interest" (Informant 4, 2024).

These reflections reinforce previous findings that women in politics not only add value in terms of integrity and transparency but also play a crucial role in building strong relationships between government and civil society. Their collaborative and inclusive leadership style contributes to the development of policies that are more responsive and highly accountable.

Strengthening the Culture of Transparency and Accountability within Political Parties

Women's increased participation in politics has emerged as a driving force in transforming the internal governance culture of political parties, especially in Malaysia's male-dominated political landscape. According to Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan (2023), women in Malaysian political parties continue to face systemic challenges such as gender stereotypes, patriarchal leadership structures, and tokenistic representation. Despite these barriers, their active involvement has created momentum for structural reforms that prioritize inclusivity, meritocracy, and organizational transparency.

Women leaders have increasingly demanded that party operations, particularly in candidate selection and resource management, be conducted through transparent and accountable mechanisms. This is in response to long-standing practices of patronage politics, cronyism, and opaque decision-making processes that often favor male elites. Their advocacy aligns with global best practices on political integrity, as promoted by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021), which emphasize the need for open, merit-based leadership pipelines to enhance democratic legitimacy. A female informant from a political party expressed:

"We often push for candidate selection processes to be conducted openly and based on merit, rather than solely on personal connections or vested interests." (Informant 2, 2023).

Such demands reflect broader efforts to institutionalize ethical standards and integrity within political parties, ensuring that leadership positions are awarded based on competence, capability, and community trust. Moreover, women's involvement in advocating for financial transparency such as the disclosure of party funding, expenditure, and allocation of campaign resources has contributed to increased public scrutiny and higher standards of accountability.

Bauhr et al. (2024) suggest that the presence of women in government helps to reduce petty corruption, such as bribery in everyday public services (for example, schools and healthcare). This study uses the most comprehensive subnational data available in Europe to date. Recent research published in *Scientific Reports* (2025) further shows that women are significantly less involved in political corruption networks: only 10% in the case of Brazil and 20% in the case of Spain. Male individuals, on the other hand, are more likely to occupy central positions within these networks. Furthermore, women's insistence on fair processes challenges entrenched party norms that marginalize capable candidates in favor of politically connected individuals, thereby strengthening democratic competition and voter confidence.

In addition to internal reforms, women's leadership also plays a critical role in bridging the gap between political parties and civil society. By advocating for stakeholder engagement and public consultations, women leaders promote more participatory decision-making processes that reflect the needs and aspirations of grassroots communities, including marginalized and underrepresented groups.

In summary, the increased visibility and assertiveness of women in demanding transparency and accountability within political parties signal a transformative shift toward more democratic, ethical, and inclusive political practices in Malaysia. This shift not only strengthens party governance but also lays the groundwork for broader institutional reforms that align with Malaysia's commitments to democratic consolidation and sustainable development.

Strengthening Institutional Resilience through Diverse Perspectives

Another significant impact identified from women's participation in politics is their contribution to strengthening institutional resilience. Institutional resilience refers to the ability of a political system, administration, or organization to maintain stability, efficiency, and credibility in the face of various internal and external challenges. Women contribute to this aspect through a leadership approach that is more collaborative, inclusive, and responsive contrasting with traditional leadership styles that are often hierarchical and exclusive.

In Malaysia, several informants indicated that the presence of women in special committees, policy coordination bodies, and state administrations has strengthened decision-making processes by incorporating a broader range of perspectives. One academic informant observed:

"Women in administration bring different social perspectives, not solely focusing on economic or security issues. Their approach is more balanced, taking into account the impact of policies on grassroots communities, thereby making institutions more sensitive and resilient to social crises." (Informant 6, 2024)

Research by Okpe, Othman, and Osman (2021) further confirms that women in Malaysian politics tend to prioritize community engagement and consensus-building over the authoritarian approaches typically dominated by male leaders. This helps stabilize institutions, as decisions made through inclusive and transparent processes are more readily accepted by various stakeholders.

For example, during Malaysia's response to the COVID-19 crisis, several women leaders at the state and parliamentary levels played active roles in ensuring that aid reached vulnerable communities. These efforts not only enhanced public trust in the government but also demonstrated that women's social sensitivity and community care are critical elements in strengthening institutional resilience. A senior government official interviewed for this study emphasized:

"Women in politics tend to consider the long-term impact of policies on public well-being, rather than merely pursuing short-term political victories. This makes institutions more sustainable in managing political and social pressures." (Informant 3, 2023)

Thus, women's participation in politics not only adds value in terms of ethics and transparency but also contributes to the development of stronger, more responsive, and resilient institutions an essential quality in the current context of political uncertainty and global challenges.

Expanding the Governance Agenda Beyond Economic and Security Issues

The findings of this study further demonstrate that women in politics play a crucial role in broadening the scope of national governance by highlighting social and humanitarian issues that are often overlooked by male-dominated leadership, which tends to focus primarily on economic, security, and infrastructure matters. This approach is driven by women's attentiveness to the well-being of society, particularly concerning vulnerable groups such as women, children, persons with disabilities (PWD), and the elderly. One female political informant remarked:

"Many women leaders raise issues that are often considered 'soft' by traditional male leadership, such as mental health, domestic violence, children's rights, and family welfare, in policy debates. Although these issues may seem minor, they have a significant impact on the quality of life of the people." (Informant 4, 2024)

One of the most notable examples is the leadership of Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail during her tenure as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development. She introduced various initiatives to address domestic violence, strengthen social protection for children, and promote mental health as a national agenda (Bernama, 2019). This leadership approach illustrates that the presence of women in political leadership does more than increase numerical representation it drives meaningful shifts in policy priorities toward more comprehensive and human-centered agendas.

The study by UN Women (2018) supports these findings, stating that women in politics are more likely to advance social policies that benefit society as a whole, including public health, education, and poverty eradication programs. This is consistent with the Malaysian experience, where leaders like Nurul Izzah Anwar have championed community initiatives such as the Projek Wanita Permatang Pauh, which provides skill development and social empowerment programs for grassroots women. Women's participation also creates space for the inclusion of voices that have historically been underrepresented in national policy discourse. As one informant from a women's NGO stated:

"Women in politics have helped elevate previously overlooked issues, such as the rights of female workers, access to reproductive healthcare, and economic opportunities for single mothers. This allows national policies to become more inclusive and responsive to the actual needs of the people." (Informant 7, 2024)

In summary, women's participation in politics not only enhances the integrity and transparency of governance but also expands the national development agenda toward holistic social well-being, ensuring that no group is left behind in the progress of national development.

Women's Leadership and Its Positive Implications for Social Sustainability

Women's participation in political leadership not only impacts national governance but also carries significant implications for advancing social sustainability. Social sustainability refers to society's capacity to build fair, inclusive, and resilient relationships that ensure the well-being of all groups, regardless of background. The presence of women in political spaces helps expand the policy focus to include social issues that are often neglected, such as family welfare, mental health, education, and the rights of marginalized communities.

This inclusive approach contributes to the development of a more balanced and holistic society, while also raising public awareness of the need to formulate policies that benefit all segments of the population. By addressing these often-overlooked areas, women's leadership promotes social cohesion and ensures that no group is excluded from the nation's development agenda.

Gender Empowerment and Inclusive Development

One of the most significant impacts of women's participation in politics is the advancement of comprehensive gender empowerment and the promotion of inclusive social development. The presence of women in political leadership not only challenges entrenched gender norms and stereotypes but also creates institutional pathways for addressing the needs of historically marginalized groups, such as women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023).

In the Malaysian context, the increasing visibility of women in politics demonstrates that cultural barriers, gender stereotypes, and male-dominated political structures can be progressively dismantled through awareness campaigns, gender-sensitive education, and institutional reforms. Empowering women in politics goes beyond achieving numerical representation; it requires transforming power relations to ensure that women's voices and the interests of vulnerable communities are integrated into national policy frameworks (Krook, 2020).

UN Women (2018) emphasizes that when women are actively involved in governance, governments tend to prioritize inclusive social policies, such as poverty alleviation, education for women and children, and reproductive health services. This finding is supported by Chen, Paxton, and Painter (2019), who argue that gender-diverse legislatures are statistically more likely to pass legislation focused on social welfare, healthcare, and family policies.

In Malaysia, grassroots programs such as Projek Wanita Permatang Pauh, led by Nurul Izzah Anwar, exemplify how female leadership can translate into practical empowerment for rural women through skills training, entrepreneurship programs, and community capacity-building. These initiatives not only improve economic opportunities but also enhance women's agency and leadership at the local level (Anwar, 2020). A representative from a women's NGO interviewed in this study remarked:

"In the past, women's voices were often regarded as minor or secondary issues. However, with the increased presence of women in politics, there is now a wider platform to represent the voices of women and other marginalized groups. This has resulted in the development of policies that are fairer and more inclusive." (Informant 7, 2024)

Such developments reflect broader global evidence showing that gender-balanced decision-making bodies contribute to more equitable and sustainable governance outcomes (United Nations, 2020). Countries like Rwanda and Sweden, for example, have implemented mandatory gender quotas that have not only increased women's representation but also shifted policy priorities toward social justice, equality, and inclusive economic development (Burnet, 2011; Dahlerup, 2018).

Positive Leadership Models for the Younger Generation

Women's participation in politics also serves as a powerful leadership model for younger generations, particularly for young women and girls. Historically, leadership images in Malaysia, as in many other countries, have been predominantly male, shaped by deep-rooted patriarchal cultural and political norms (Krook, 2020). However, the emergence of prominent female leaders such as Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, YB Hannah Yeoh, and YB Maria Chin Abdullah has helped shift this narrative. These leaders have demonstrated that women are capable of effectively leading ministries, political parties, and civil society movements at the highest levels of governance.

Empirical studies support the notion that visible female leadership can reshape societal expectations. For instance, A global review encompassing 137 academic articles found that women's leadership in the health sector not only drives innovation and improves financial performance, but also strengthens organizational culture and inspires young women to believe that they, too, can lead. Democratic and responsive transformational leadership by women further shapes societal expectations toward inclusive leadership (Dhatt, R., Theobald, S., Büyüm, A. M., Rosser, E., & Hay, K. (2025).

These findings are relevant to Malaysia, where women's visibility in politics can similarly inspire young women to pursue leadership roles across political, social, and economic sectors. An academic informant interviewed in this study noted:

"Female leaders provide a clear example to younger generations that leadership is not exclusive to men. They inspire young girls to aspire to leadership positions in politics, social development, and the economy." (Informant 8, 2024)

Beyond individual role models, institutional efforts such as mentorship programs, leadership academies, and gender mainstreaming policies are essential to sustain this momentum. International models, such as Australia's Women's Leadership Institute and New Zealand's Office for Women, have demonstrated the effectiveness of investing in youth leadership development programs targeted at young women (Australian Government, 2021; New Zealand Ministry for Women, 2020). These programs not only prepare the next generation of women leaders but also ensure that leadership pipelines are diverse, inclusive, and representative of society's broader demographic realities.

Emphasis on Long-Term Policy Priorities

Women in politics tend to prioritize long-term, socially impactful policies that contribute to nation-building and community resilience. Unlike traditional leadership models that often emphasize short-term political achievements or high-profile economic projects, women leaders have been shown to focus on structural social policies such as early childhood education, family welfare, mental health, child protection, and community empowerment (UN Women, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025). Recent UNDP analysis further notes that women in leadership roles are central to resilience-building, particularly in post-crisis contexts, because of their emphasis on inclusive recovery measures and community-based welfare systems (UNDP, 2024).

For instance, Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, during her tenure as Malaysia's Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development, prioritized mental health reform and child protection policies—areas that had received minimal policy attention prior to her leadership (Bernama, 2019). She introduced the Pelan Strategik Kesihatan Mental 2020–2025, aimed at integrating mental health care into community and primary health services, addressing the alarming findings of the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019, which reported that approximately 29% of Malaysian adults experience mental health challenges (Institute for Public Health, 2020).

This long-term vision aligns with leadership models in Nordic countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway, where high representation of women in politics has been linked to robust social welfare systems. In Sweden, for example, women make up nearly 47% of parliamentarians (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023), and their leadership has been instrumental in institutionalizing gender-responsive budgeting, universal childcare, generous parental leave policies, and comprehensive mental health

services (OECD, 2024). These policies not only promote gender equality but also contribute to higher societal well-being, increased economic participation of women, and reduced social inequalities (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Similarly, New Zealand, under the leadership of former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, gained international recognition for prioritizing mental health through the establishment of a dedicated Wellbeing Budget in 2019, a framework that remains in use and was updated in 2024 to strengthen funding for mental health services, child welfare, and domestic violence prevention (New Zealand Treasury, 2024). Ardern's approach exemplifies how women leaders can reframe national priorities to include long-term societal outcomes rather than short-term political gains.

In contrast, Malaysia's political landscape remains largely reactive to immediate electoral considerations, often prioritizing infrastructure projects or populist measures aimed at short-term voter satisfaction (Mohamad & Mazlan, 2018; Lodi, Sacchi, & Vidoli, 2024). The relatively low representation of women only 13.5% in the Dewan Rakyat as of the 15th General Election (Parliament of Malaysia, 2023) limits the integration of long-term social issues into mainstream policy agendas. This contrasts starkly with countries that have institutionalized gender quotas and witnessed not only increased women's participation but also a substantive shift in governance priorities toward social equity and sustainability (UN Women, 2021). One senior government officer interviewed highlighted this gap, stating:

"Women in politics tend to be more concerned with the long-term impacts of policies, particularly those affecting social welfare and human capital development. They do not merely pursue immediate political gains." (Informant 3, 2024)

These international comparisons underline the critical need for Malaysia to strengthen women's political representation and leadership, not only as a matter of equity but also as a strategy to secure long-term national resilience. Learning from models such as Sweden and New Zealand could guide Malaysia in institutionalizing long-term, people-centered governance frameworks that prioritize social sustainability alongside economic growth.

Research Recommendations

Policy and Institutional Reform

Strengthening policy and institutional frameworks is critical to ensuring that women's participation in politics goes beyond fulfilling quotas and truly influences the policymaking process. While the implementation of gender quotas can increase the number of women in the political arena, their effectiveness depends on clear and consistent enforcement mechanisms. Countries such as Rwanda and Sweden demonstrate that quotas accompanied by legislative enforcement and monitoring systems can produce high and effective levels of women's representation in decision-making. Therefore, it is recommended that Malaysia enact a Gender Political Representation Act that sets a minimum target of 30–40% female candidates at all levels of elections, and institutionalize Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) to ensure that budget allocations support long-term social development agendas. In addition, the establishment of a National Women's Leadership Council to monitor achievements, evaluate policy effectiveness, and provide recommendations for improvement would strengthen the impact of women's engagement in the country's political structures.

Governance Enhancement

In addition to policy reform, improving governance effectiveness requires the active involvement of women in strategic and high-risk portfolios. International studies show that women's leadership is often associated with lower levels of corruption and greater adherence to democratic values, particularly when they hold key portfolios such as finance, economic development, or public security. However, in Malaysia, women are still rarely appointed to lead these portfolios, which are traditionally dominated by men. To address this, relevant recommendations include appointing women to strategic portfolios,

establishing a Gender Governance Index to measure the impact of women's leadership on governance performance, and introducing public scorecards to assess the effectiveness of social policies implemented under female leadership. Such measures would not only enhance transparency and accountability but also strengthen public confidence in women's ability to manage critical sectors of the nation.

Social Sustainability Integration and Future Research

Women's leadership also plays a vital role in advancing social sustainability through the implementation of long-term policies that directly impact public well-being. Research by the World Economic Forum (2025) and UN Women (2025) shows that female leaders tend to prioritize policies such as early childhood education, mental health, child protection, and family welfare—all essential components of building resilient communities. To optimize this role in Malaysia, community development programs led by women, especially in rural areas, should be strengthened to support their engagement in both local and national politics. At the same time, future research should assess the long-term impact of women's leadership on social sustainability indicators, including public trust, inequality gaps, and the effectiveness of social protection systems. Comparative studies between Malaysia and other ASEAN countries would also help identify best practices that can be adapted to the local context, ensuring that women's participation in politics not only has an immediate effect but also builds a solid foundation for the nation's future development.

Conclusion

This study confirms a strong positive relationship between women's participation in politics and improvements in governance quality and social sustainability in Malaysia. Women leaders have been shown to transform political cultures from authoritarian and exclusionary practices into more inclusive, ethical, and accountable systems. Their leadership style promotes collaborative decision-making, prioritizes public interest, and integrates long-term social policies into the national agenda.

Examples from Malaysia demonstrate that women leaders have successfully mainstreamed issues such as mental health, domestic violence, child protection, and family development areas previously marginalized into national policymaking. This approach ensures that policies are more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of society, contributing to long-term community resilience and equitable development.

However, structural and cultural barriers, including the absence of legislated gender quotas, limited leadership development programs, and insufficient institutional support, continue to hinder women's full and sustained participation in politics. Addressing these challenges requires targeted reforms, such as the enforcement of a minimum gender quota, institutionalized leadership training, and comprehensive support systems. Strengthening women's political participation will not only enhance the quality of governance but also foster a more mature, gender-sensitive, and citizen-responsive political culture, ultimately advancing Malaysia's democratic development and ensuring no group is left behind.

References

- [1]. Anwar, N. I. (2020). Empowering rural women through community-based programs: The case of Projek Wanita Permatang Pauh. Kuala Lumpur: People's Justice Foundation.
- [2]. Australian Government. (2021). Women's Leadership Institute Australia: Leadership programs. Retrieved from <https://www.wlia.org.au/>
- [3]. Bauhr, M., Charron, N., & Wängnerud, L. (2024). Presence of women in government and petty corruption in public services: Evidence from comprehensive subnational data in Europe. *Political Behavior*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09925-x>
- [4]. Bernama. (2019, Mac 8). Wan Azizah tekad perjuang hak wanita dan keluarga. <https://www.bernama.com>
- [5]. Bernama. (2019, October 10). Wan Azizah launches mental health strategic plan 2020–2025. Bernama. <https://www.bernama.com/en/general/news.php?id=1776667>
- [6]. Burnet, J. E. (2011). Women have found respect: Gender quotas, symbolic representation, and female empowerment in Rwanda. *Politics & Gender*, 7(3), 303–334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X11000250>
- [7]. Chen, L., Paxton, P., & Painter, M. A. (2019). Gender and policymaking: new evidence from global data. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(3), 784–807. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12293>

- [8]. Dhatt, R., Theobald, S., Büyüm, A. M., Rosser, E., & Hay, K. (2025). Maximising women's leadership in health: A global review of evidence and strategies. *BMJ Global Health*, 10(2), e013928. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2024-013928>
- [9]. Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy. (2024). Malaysia scores high in education, health for women in 2023 but way behind in political empowerment. <https://ova.galencentre.org/dosm-malaysia-scores-high-in-education-health-for-women-in-2023-but-way-behind-in-political-empowerment/>
- [10]. Institute for Public Health. (2020). National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019: Non-communicable diseases, healthcare demand, and health literacy. Ministry of Health Malaysia. <https://iku.gov.my/nhms-2019>
- [11]. Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). Women in national parliaments: World and regional averages. IPU Parline. <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages>
- [12]. Kartini Aboo Talib, Mohd Faizal, M., & Nurul Nadia, A. H. (2021). Women's political participation in Malaysia: Strengthening democracy and societal representation. *Journal of International Studies*, 17(2), 45–59.
- [13]. Krook, M. L. (2020). *Violence against women in politics*. Oxford University Press.
- [14]. Lodi, E., Sacchi, S., & Vidoli, F. (2024). Can women leaders change societal behaviour? Evidence from Italian municipalities. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2410.06091>
- [15]. Maizura, M. Z., Zaleha, O., & Haron, H. (2023). Gender diversity and environmental, social and governance (ESG) of Malaysian listed companies. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(2), 123-134. https://kwpublications.com/papers_submitted/10287/gender-diversity-and-environmental-social-and-governance-esg-of-malaysian-listed-companies.pdf
- [16]. Malaysian Parliament (2023). Statistik Ahli Parlimen mengikut jantina PRU15. www.parlimen.gov.my
- [17]. Mohamad, M., & Mazlan, A. R. (2018). Gender and politics in Malaysia: Women and political participation. *Akademika*, 88(1), 25–35.
- [18]. New Zealand Ministry for Women. (2020). Promoting women's leadership in New Zealand. Retrieved from <https://women.govt.nz/work-skills/leadership>
- [19]. New Zealand Treasury. (2024). The Wellbeing Budget 2024: Focusing on long-term outcomes. The New Zealand Government. <https://budget.govt.nz>
- [20]. Noraini Mohd Noor. (2019). Wanita dan Politik di Malaysia: Analisis Kritis. *Journal of Malaysian Studies*, 37(1), 85–102.
- [21]. Noraini, M. N., Azizah, H., & Norasmah, O. (2020). Empowering women's leadership in localising sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(12), 1–13. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/814d/43f4dc19c69727197edf17938f7af582a3b2.pdf>tion In Uniformed Units.
- [22]. Okpe, V. V., Othman, M. F., & Osman, N. (2021). An assessment into women political participation in Malaysian democratic governance. *e-BANGI: Jurnal Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan*, 18(5), 21–36.
- [23]. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). Gender equality at the centre of public policy. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org>
- [24]. Ornstein, P., & Ribeiro, E. (2025). Gender disparities in political corruption networks: Comparative evidence from Brazil and Spain. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 98218. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-98218-2>
- [25]. Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., Sockbeson, C. E. S., Hall, A. V., & Halliday, C. S. (2024). Gender and evaluations of leadership behaviors: A meta-analytic review of 50 years of research. *The Leadership Quarterly*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101780>
- [26]. Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan. (2023). Challenges for women in political parties in Malaysia and acceleration strategies to leadership in politics. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. <https://www.kas.de/documents/272088/23299843/E-Book%2B2023-0208%2BChallenges%2Bfor%2BWomen%2Bin%2BPolitical%2BParties%2Bin%2BMalaysia>.
- [27]. UN Women. (2018). *Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: UN Women.
- [28]. UN Women. (2022). *Women in politics: 2022*. <https://www.unwomen.org>
- [29]. UNDP. (2021). *Gender Equality and Inclusive Governance: Progress and Challenges*. United Nations Development Programme.
- [30]. United Nations Development Programme. (2024, May 15). *Advancing resilience-building through gender equality and women's leadership*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/geneva/blog/advancing-resilience-building-through-gender-equality-and-womens-leadership>
- [31]. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. (2025). *Progress on the sustainable development goals: The gender snapshot 2025*. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org>
- [32]. United Nations. (2020). *The world's women 2020: Trends and statistics*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Retrieved Month Day, 2025, from United Nations website.
- [33]. World Economic Forum. (2025, March 5). *Political power and economic parity: Why we need more women leaders for the future of jobs*. WEF. <https://www.weforum.org>
- [34]. Zetterberg, P. (2020). Gender parity and the strengthening of women's political representation in Mexico. *Politics & Gender*, 16(4), 1019-1027.Othman, and Osman (2021).

