

Extraordinary Leadership Abilities in Empowering Women's Political Representation in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in national legislative bodies, local governments, and peace-building processes can potentially change the current political landscape, including the future. The presence of women in politics will alter societal views towards women and girls and their roles in decision-making. This research paper discusses women's extraordinary abilities in empowering women's political involvement in Malaysia from 1980 to 2013. This study also aims to examine the exceptional characteristics of women who reached the highest level at either party or national level leadership. The research method used for this study is qualitative, which includes a combination of observation and interviews with a selected number of respondents among former cabinet ministers or current members of the cabinet, scholars studying genders, and Members of Parliament as well as the State Assemblymen. In addition, the researcher also obtained secondary data related to the study. Following that, the data and tables obtained from credible sources were subsequently analysed using qualitative methods. The conceptual frameworks adopted for this study include the theory of leadership, the concept of empowerment and the concept of gender. The findings from the study reveal that although women's political awareness is increasing, the opportunity for them to compete at the highest level remains a challenge due to the lack of readiness among party leadership to place and hope for women candidates as their primary choice, particularly in parties such as UMNO, PAS, MIC, and others.

Keywords: Empowerment; participation; women; extraordinary; competent

INTRODUCTION

Women are often associated with leadership styles with cooperation as the foundation, while men are frequently linked to aggressive and conflict-driven leadership styles. Such perception stems from the social construction of gender that assumes men's way of thinking is more rational while women are overly influenced by emotions when making decisions. Despite many challenges faced by women to actively and effectively participate in politics (Welsh, B. 2019), these challenges should not be an excuse for women to steer clear from being involved in the political arena (Ahmad 1994, Dancz, Virginia, 1987 & Zakuan 2023). Although women are often overshadowed by men's leadership styles, it is undeniable that just like men, women are also equally capable of demonstrating their ability to govern effectively (Peggy, N.et al 2025). However, numerous barriers persist for women in leadership, such as having to deal with perceptions and attitudes that frequently question their competence and ability to lead. This is due to the longstanding masculine culture embedded in institutions and organisations. Henceforth, the involvement of women in legislative bodies (Parliament), local government (State Legislative Assembly), and peace-building processes has the potential to transform the current political situation and shape the future (Ahmad Zakuan, 2022). The presence of women in politics can shift societal perceptions about women and girls regarding the importance of their role in decision-making processes (Rashila Ramli 2005, Rashila Ramli & Saleha Hassan 2010).

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to examine and identify the exceptional abilities of women in empowering political participation in Malaysia (1980-2013). Malaysia has a population in which women constitute more than 50 per cent of the population. Therefore, women need to be active in politics, in order to represent women's hopes and aspirations in the enactment of policies, administration, and community and country development. This study is based on the interviews and observations made towards the former and the current members of the cabinet, Members of Parliaments and the selected scholars. This study illustrates that women who possess extraordinary abilities are more likely to excel and be able to dominate the political arena. Women are also seen as competent, efficient and intelligent in addressing political issues and problems.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used by the researcher is based on the methods within political science, namely the qualitative research design (Charmaz, 1990& Mason, 2010). In this study, the researcher employed two primary data collection methods, which are observation and interviews. The interviews were conducted using the purposive sampling method, where the interview candidates were chosen based on the designated criteria. Several of the selected informants are academics and political figures. Results from the interview are collected as primary data that will showcase the differing perspectives on the extraordinary abilities, competencies and leadership of women in addressing issues, problems and challenges faced by women in the political arena (Yusoff et al.2016).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The involvement and participation of women in politics can no longer be denied, similar to their competencies, high political awareness and adequate preparedness. However, according to Kamilia Ibrahim (1998), women's participation in politics largely depends on the role played by women leaders at the highest levels. She outlined three leadership patterns of UMNO women leaders: Fatimah Hasyim, Aishah Ghani and Rafidah Aziz. Fatimah Hasyim adopts an attitude that accepts the Malay political structure, which places greater importance on the role of men and positions them as dominant over women. She managed to establish a good relationship with the highest leadership such as Tunku Abdul Rahman. Through this strategy, Fatimah Hasyim successfully lobbied for equal pay for women as well.

Aisyah Ghani, on the other hand, emphasised bringing educated women to take the helm of women's leadership in UMNO. Meanwhile, Rafidah Aziz encouraged women to be more active beyond political fields but also in social and economic areas while still reminding them of the important roles played by women in elections. In addition, she also trained UMNO women to be more attuned to the issues at the national and international levels. Unfortunately, her efforts were not well received due to the attitude of the party members, who still adhered to the culture in the party that positioned women as supporters of men.

As highlighted by Sainsbury (2004), democracy does not occur because the objectives of the policies formulated need to bring benefits to both sides. According to Ghazali (1996), the basis of selecting a leader is based on the individual's abilities, which are considered to be superior to other members of the group. The elected leader will be chosen based on certain criteria, such as age, economic status, and descent from a respected family. A leader within a social community group is recognised as a leader. Therefore, the qualities that women need to possess are trustworthiness, integrity and honesty. Women must be trustworthy and responsible in carrying out their duties as leaders who are capable of fulfilling the responsibilities entrusted to them effectively. They should also be able to determine their leadership direction, particularly in making decisions and carrying responsibilities.

Women's participation in the political arena is an example of how women have crossed the boundary between the public and private spheres. This situation would commonly cause discomfort among the majority of men. They might be worried about their position, and some may potentially feel threatened in their standing. This situation should not happen because, in reality, there is a dependency between these two genders. This situation will become more stable once the borders are opened without restrictions, allowing men and women to travel freely between the available spaces (Clayton, 2021).

RESULT

Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz can be regarded as the first prominent Malay female leader whose charisma significantly distinguished her from both her predecessors and successors. Moreover, in the field of economics, she appeared to have a broader knowledge compared to other male ministers. In the history of Malaysia, she is the only Wanita UMNO (UMNO's Women Wing) Chief who was assigned as the Minister of International Trade and Industry, a portfolio that is considered important and senior in the cabinet. Other female leaders, both her predecessors and successors, were limited to roles focusing exclusively on women's affairs and welfare. Hence, Rafidah is regarded as an idol for women due to her exceptional charisma, which serves as an example for achieving positions equal to or surpassing her own. Her outstanding educational background and expertise in the field of economics had propelled her to a position on par with the abilities and skills of men. Her prominence leadership and eloquence in articulating arguments at international forums are well-recognised across the region and globally. As a result, Rafidah was once referred to with the nickname 'Iron Lady' by the international media practitioner.

According to Rafidah Aziz, she was entrusted with the responsibility by Mahathir Mohammad to create a good and conducive environment for women to engage in political activities, ensuring that women progressed and were able to showcase their leadership capabilities. Therefore, she ensures a quality leader should carry qualities such as integrity, honesty, high discipline in various aspects, diligence, cross-border thinking, open-mindedness and the capability to take charge, which is the opposite of being in charge. In order to cultivate and produce future leaders, it must start from home, by parents and family (Interview: June 2016).

Rafidah Aziz is quite experienced, intelligent and well-respected not only in Malaysia but also internationally. Rafidah is fearless—fearless because of her self-confidence. Her confidence, on the other hand, comes from her experience and knowledge. I still remember when she had a heated debate with Madeleine Albright, U.S. Secretary of State at that time, in an international forum conducted in Kuala Lumpur. Albright was left speechless because Rafidah spoke with complete facts without needing to refer to any of her officers. She is also highly respected in international forums such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) and others.

Under Rafidah's leadership as the Minister of International Trade and Industry for almost three decades, Malaysia went through a period of prosperity in attracting foreign investments to the country. She is willing to lose her 'quality time' with her family and spend most of her time visiting foreign countries to attract foreign investment. In Wanita UMNO, Rafidah Aziz served as the Chief of the UMNO Women's Wing twice, from 1984 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2009, both at the national level, as well as in the state of Perak. The role she played as the Minister of International Trade and Industry since 1987 has made Malaysia's economy a preferred destination for foreign investors while also boosting the country's economy through foreign trade. Her competencies and achievements were greatly supported by her experience while holding important positions such as Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Public Enterprises (1976), Deputy Minister of Finance (1977-1980) and Minister of Public Enterprises (1980-1987). Rafidah was also once appointed as the Senator of the State Assembly (1974).

Rafidah Aziz was the backbone in developing the policies and direction of several federal government agencies. Among the agencies and organisations involved were the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) from 1973 to 1976, the Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority (RISDA) from 1973 to 1976, the Consumers' Protection and Advisory Council from 1973 to 1976, the Family Planning Board from 1973 to 1976, the National Youth Advisory and Consultative Council as well as the Chairperson of Tunku Kurshiah College Board. Rafidah Aziz was first appointed as the Member of Parliament after winning the Selayang parliamentary seat in the 1982 General Election.

In the 2008 General Election of Malaysia, Rafidah contested using the Barisan Nasional ticket. She contested in the Kuala Kangsar, Perak parliamentary constituency. She successfully won by polling 10,735 votes. Rafidah had contested against PAS candidate Khairuddin Abd Malik who gathered 9,277 votes (lost). The voter turnout was 73 per cent. There were 373 spoiled votes. Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz was the former Minister of International Trade and Industry, serving from 20 May 1978 to 19 March 2008 when she was dropped from the then Cabinet of Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi despite securing a significant victory in Kuala Kangsar. Under her leadership as the Chief of Wanita UMNO until 2009, the women's wing has become more active in organising courses to enhance their business knowledge while adopting a more professional approach to their party administration, following a more organised and updated system. The voices of women also have grown stronger, with more women being appointed or elected to the UMNO Supreme Council.



Tan Sri Datin Paduka Seri Hajah Zaleha Ismail also possesses extraordinary abilities—she is very meticulous and often plans strategies before taking action, as well as conducting her own research in order to strengthen her position from the grassroots level. Even though she did not manage to defeat Rafidah Aziz during the election for Chief of Wanita UMNO, Rafidah did not put her on the sideline. Instead, she was appointed as the Secretary of Wanita UMNO's Task Force. This was an honour for her, as Rafidah Aziz recognised her as a visionary. Nevertheless, a high level of competency is required to save time for women to act as effective leaders.

Zaleha Ismail is an approachable leader—her strength stands out most from the grassroots level, where she focuses on helping and resolving issues of the people. Her sincerity in carrying out her duties without expecting any rewards makes her a highly respected and noble female figure. Despite being a politician, she has also dedicated her attention, time and energy to volunteer work. Her sincere acceptance of responsibility, combined with her diligence and strong determination, has made her a highly respected figure. Furthermore, Zaleha Ismail is a prominent name among other female leaders in Malaysia. She served as the Minister of National Unity and Community Development from 1995 to 1999. Her friendliness and approachable nature have made her treasured by many.

In 1986, Zaleha Ismail became a regular member of UMNO and was eventually appointed to the UMNO Supreme Council of Malaysia. She was actively involved in politics for 30 years. She started contesting in the 1978 General Election for the Permatang seat of the Selangor State Legislative Assembly. Following that, she continued to be the Deputy Transport Minister from 1987 to 1995, when she became a member of parliament for Gombak. The peak of her career came when she was appointed as Minister at the National Unity & Ministry of Social Development from 1995 to 1999. In the 1999 General Election of Malaysia, she managed to defeat the PAS candidate, Dr Hatta Ramli, with a majority of 1,176 votes. She was awarded the Seri Mahkota Selangor Star, Bintang Ksatria Mangku Negara and Datuk Paduka Mahkota Selangor in 1979. Among other awards she recently received were the Global Peace Award in 2011, 'Tokoh Ibu Harmoni' Award in 2013 and the Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor Award for Women Leading in Charity.

Zaleha Ismail was also the Vice President of MUBARAK, a former Malaysian Member of Parliament and President of the Malaysian Council for Children Welfare, Women's Association of the ASEAN Association of Women, and President of the National Council of Women's Organisations. She was also regionally and internationally influential, as she was elected as the President of the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations (ACWO) from 1986 to 1988.

Zaleha continuously served in ACWO; she supported the president in various capacities, such as Vice President, Honorary Treasurer, and general secretary, before being reappointed as the President to lead ACWO from 1998 to 2000. She also served as the Chairperson of the Population and Development Board Country Family in Malaysia. Zaleha was also the Chairperson of Global Peace Foundation Malaysia and Wilra Malaysia Berhad.

On the other hand, Tan Sri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil was entrusted by Tun Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad to forge a highway for women to flourish, ultimately for them to emerge as the most preferred choice—not only in positions such as Women's Chief or a member of the UMNO Supreme Council but also advancing to higher ranks, such as Vice President and beyond. Building a highway for women is not an easy task for her to carry. Shahrizat works tirelessly to ensure the highway for women will provide a seamless journey for them. This is achieved by striving to further narrow the gender gap by running campaigns, delivering talks and providing education, not only for women but also for men, to raise awareness about gender issues and the importance of reducing or eliminating the gender gap.

As the Chief of Wanita UMNO, Shahrizat aims to mainstream women's involvement in various sectors, including politics, economics and social. Women are seen as institutions that harbour significant roles towards the country. In pursuit of this ambition, she established secretariats and bureaus that cover aspects such as politics, economics, welfare and knowledge. In addition, Shahrizat also drove programmes such as *Jalanan Rakyat*, which aim to expand their influences and services, and to establish stronger ties with the people. Shahrizat has also responded to the challenge and request of the party President, YAB Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, which is to make UMNO's struggle more people-oriented and spread them out to as many people as possible.

Shahrizat's involvement in politics started in 1982 when she was appointed as the Head of Wanita UMNO's Wing in the Kepong Baru division. Since 1987, she has assumed positions in bureaus under Wanita UMNO, such as a committee member of the Legal Bureau and Women's Affairs Bureau of Wanita UMNO Malaysia. In 1989, she was assigned as the Chief of Wanita UMNO for the Kepong division and later appointed as the Exco member for Wanita UMNO Malaysia. During the 1995 General Election, Tan Sri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil was chosen as a candidate and later won the Lembah Pantai parliamentary seat. With this victory, she was elected as Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia.

During the 1999 General Election, Shahrizat managed to defend her Lembah Pantai parliamentary constituency. Following that, she assumed the position of Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, responsible for the Department of Women's Affairs and the National Population and Family Development Board. Shahrizat was appointed as a member of UMNO's Supreme Council from 1996 to 1999. In 2000, she was appointed as the Deputy Head of Wanita UMNO Malaysia. As a member of the Parliament, she also performed duties as the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Malaysia in December 1999 for two years, as well as the Chairperson for the CPA South-East Asia region.

Even though Shahrizat was a member of UMNO's Kepong division, she was later transferred to the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur during the 1995 General Election. She successfully retained her victory for three terms during the election in Lembah Pantai constituency since 1995. In 1995, Shahrizat managed to defeat the former Chief Justice of Malaya, Tun Mohamed Salleh Abas, from the political party Semangat46, with a majority of 13,361 votes. The 1999 General Election also witnessed Shahrizat's success in defeating Zainur Zakaria with a majority of 1,417 votes. Similarly, the 2004 General Election marked another big victory for her following Shahrizat's triumph over the former Secretary General of the Malaysian People's Party (Parti Rakyat Malaysia, also known as PRM), Dr Sanusi Osman, who contested under the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, also known as PKR)'s ticket with a majority of 15,288 votes. She was later appointed as the Minister of Women and Family Development under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. In addition, she was also an active member of several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)—she was the Vice President 1 of the Association of Bumiputera Women in Business (Peniagawati) and the first President of the National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia (NAWEM). Furthermore, Shahrizat was also a Councillor in the Council of The Asia-Australia Institute.

According to Shahrizat, women represent 53.6 per cent of the total workforce in Malaysia, with an increase of 1.2 percentage points in 2014 (KPWKM: 2014). Their contribution is highly significant in stimulating the economy. However, the landscape of life has changed, compelling women to adopt different approaches in dealing with various issues and constraints in today's world. Shahrizat is notable for her commitment in advocating for issues such as women's participation in decision-making, maternity leaves, women's issues in the workplace, childcare

facilities, gender sensitivity and other related issues. Issues related to domestic helpers, the rise in the price of goods and services, and low household income, including less flexible work demands, have contributed to the decreasing productivity and loss of women's concentration at work. There are times when women have to make harsh decisions between family and career—which indirectly impacts the national economy. Furthermore, there is also Sayang Project—a new branding for Wanita UMNO and Barisan Nasional Women's Wing, aimed at carrying welfare, volunteering and community service to fulfil the party's wishes and address the needs of the people at the grassroots. This initiative includes the Sayang Project, Sayang Squad, Sayang Store and Sayang Tour (*Jelajah Sayang*), all of which have been mobilized across various states.

Shahrizat has advocated for women to feel more comfortable and be able to work peacefully by ensuring and advocating for the provision of various women-friendly facilities. For instance, providing infrastructure and childcare facilities close to and near the workplace, breastfeeding rooms, women-only spaces in public transportation such as buses, LRTs, MRTs, commuters and many more. Women leaders must also prove that they are playing an effective role as the backbone of the party and the country, remaining vigilant and advocating for issues such as housing, economy, entrepreneurship, education, safety, social justice, international relations and the future of the nations.

YAB Dato' Seri Dr. Hajah Wan Azizah Dato' Dr. Wan Ismail is another prominent woman political figure. Born on 3 December 1952 at Kandang Kerbau Hospital, Singapore—she was the first female appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2018. She served as the President of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat – PKR) which was founded in 1999. She was also the wife of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. She got married in 1980 and was blessed with six children—five daughters and a son.

Wan Azizah received her early education at St. Nicholas Convent School, Alor Setar. She later pursued her studies at Tunku Kurshiah College (TKC) in Seremban. She went on to study Medicine in Dublin, Ireland (1973) where she graduated in obstetrics and gynaecology. At the university, she was awarded with 'MacNoughton-Jones Gold Medal'. Upon returning to Malaysia, she became an ophthalmologist at Kuala Lumpur Hospital (HKL) and University Hospital, University of Malaya. Wan Azizah submitted her resignation in 1993 when her husband was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister. Wan Azizah got married at the age of 23 years old to Anwar Ibrahim. At that time, she is still working at Kuala Lumpur Hospital. The relationship began from a single photograph of Anwar, who at that time was the President of the Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, also known as ABIM). Their meeting was arranged by their friends in 1979, at the time when the Iranian Revolution was at its peak. A meeting that began at the canteen of HKL was later sealed with a vow on 28 February 1980. Initially, Wan Azizah's father, Wan Ismail, had reservations about their marriage. However, after their first child was born, Wan Ismail came to accept their marriage, which in turn further tightened their family connections.

Wan Azizah's father, Dato' Wan Ismail Wan Mahmood comes from Sungai Bakap, Seberang Perai, Pulau Pinang. Her father was a government officer for 30 years. His last role was at the Malaysian National Security Council, where he focused on communist terrorists. Wan Ismail was married to Datin Mariah Khamis, a full-time housewife with a Peranakan Cina background on her father's side. Whereas Wan Ismail's family originally hailed from Kampung Laut, Pasir Mas, Kelantan, with a slight connection that can be traced to Kelantanese descent.

Out of five children, Wan Azizah is the second-born. Her younger brother is a professor at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Her younger sister is a photographer at Bernama, while her youngest sister is a lawyer in Kuala Lumpur. Wan Azizah was temporarily entrusted to her uncle, Che Rus bin Tahir and Wan Asma Wan Mahmood, in Alor Setar while her parents migrated to London. Her foster father worked as a Health Officer for Kedah/Perlis and introduced her to public health.

Wan Azizah's political journey began after her husband was dismissed and arrested on 20 September 1998. Datin Seri Azizah assisted in establishing Parti Keadilan Nasional on 4 April 1999, which is currently known as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), with her serving as the president. After Anwar Ibrahim was released in 2008, she was appointed by her party as the 'de facto' General Advisor until 2015. Wan Azizah competed in the first General Election for the Permatang Pauh constituency in 1999, and she successfully defeated Dato' Seri Ibrahim Saad with a majority of 9,077 votes. She also retained the seat in the 2004 election, with a reduced majority after a few recounts, defeating Ustaz Pirdaus Ismail. In the 2008 General Election on 8 March 2008, Wan Azizah stood against the same opponent where she once again won the parliamentary seat of Permatang Pauh, representing Parti Keadilan Rakyat, which is a part of the People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat) coalition with PAS and DAP. Wan Azizah is also the former Leader of the Opposition in Malaysia. She stepped down as the Leader of the Opposition and Member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh on 31 July 2008 to make way for her husband, Anwar Ibrahim, to compete in the state by-election. On 1 April 2015, Anwar Ibrahim was found guilty of sodomy against his former private assistant and sentenced to five years in jail. Following this incident, Anwar Ibrahim was disqualified from the parliamentary seat and as the Leader of the Opposition. The Election Commission of Malaysia (also known as Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia, SPR) has decided 7 May 2015 as the new date for the 2015 Permatang Pauh by-election. On 8 May 2015, Wan Azizah claimed the seat and was appointed as the new Leader of the Opposition with a majority of 8,841 votes triumphed over BN's candidate, Shabudin Yahya and other two independent candidates.

On 12 July 2008, Wan Azizah was honoured during the official birthday celebration of the Governor (Yang di-Pertua) of Penang. She received the Order of the Defender of the State (Darjah Panglima Pangkuan Negeri), which is a prestigious second-rank chivalric order in the state. The award carries the title Dato' Seri. During the 2018 General Election, Wan Azizah was appointed as the Deputy Minister of Malaysia as well as the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development. It was a part of the agreement made for Mahathir to serve as interim if elected, seek a pardon for Anwar and clear the path for him to take over as the Prime Minister.

Wan Azizah is a woman with an unyielding and iron-will spirit, even though she was tested with various challenges in her life. Her perseverance secured the hearts of the voters, resulting in her being chosen as a member of parliament in every election she contested. In fact, her leadership has never been questioned. She managed to manoeuvre PKR until it became a formidable party. As the former Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, she is responsible for reviewing the policy and direction towards achieving gender equality, family development and a caring community that are in line with the government's commitment to eradicate any form of discrimination against women and the Beijing Declaration.

FINDINGS

Should a woman embody a blend of exceptional leadership, qualities similar to Rafidah Aziz, Zaleha Ismail, Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and Wan Aziz—she would surely be able to soar to the highest positions, whether in party or national leadership. To face these challenges, according to Hairi et al (2025) & Saidon, N (2022), women need to equip themselves with extraordinary and exceptional qualities as leaders for them to advance to a higher level or equivalent to men, or even better than men. As a matter of fact, women are more passionate about carrying out their duties as leaders. They are able to multitask, which requires a high level of patience, and capabilities as well as strong skills in control and management.

a. Discipline

Women leaders possess a strong sense of discipline, exemplified by being a leader who is punctual and adheres to the set schedules in management and administration (Peggy, N.et 2025). Decisions are made carefully and meticulously at all levels, ensuring that all responsibilities are executed with utmost seriousness when performing tasks and duties. Good leaders need to have high mental discipline, maintaining a consistent positive mind while executing their roles with the team to the best of their abilities. According to Nik Safiah Karim (1990), she made a huge assumption that women have reached a relatively high level of maturity—who knows the direction they aim to take and are knowledgeable. She hopes that women in the 21st century are women who think, as well as vigilant of the upheavals happening around them. Meanwhile, in the field of national politics, they would at least be able to cast their votes with full awareness of the candidates and the issues raised by the candidates. At present, the political landscape in Malaysia exhibits some sort of dichotomy where, on one hand, Malaysia can still take pride in its meaningful inclusion of women in political leadership.

b. Diligence

The next advantage women leaders possess is their diligence. Due to their natural traits of being friendly and diligent (Dancz, Virginia, 1987), women find it easier to carry out businesses at various levels. In fact, women leaders are often more likeable compared to their male counterparts, who appear stricter in certain matters. Furthermore, women excel at organising and managing because they are dedicated and consider themselves team players, not leaving tasks solely to their subordinates.

c. Ethical

A leader also needs to practise ethical culture, such as unity, caring, teamwork, politeness, discipline, healthy living (Hasan &Noor 2023), honesty and sincerity. They need to have passion and competency, in addition to an overarching perspective of an issue. Additionally, they must remain vigilant and committed to essential tasks, including community service within their environment. An effective leader must possess excellent communication skills and exhibit a high level of motivation. Motivation, energy, initiative, perseverance, the ability to uplift oneself and an unwavering determination have long been recognised as hallmarks of a strong leader. Every leader must have a strong determination to achieve their goals (Idris Zakaria: 1991).

d. Self-challenging

Women frequently set high benchmarks in order to achieve their aspirations and pursue their battles (Yusoff et al. 2016). Women with extraordinary abilities constantly challenge themselves to strive for success. They will aim at proving their capabilities, abilities and efficiency in their work performance, ensuring it meets the global level. In any organisation or field, leadership is measured through the ability to deal with and manage changes. This includes identifying changes, formulating strategies, addressing those changes and implementing the necessary steps to successfully navigate any shifts that occur in the environment. This is further supported by Nik Safiah Karim (1990), who described that women occupying cabinet positions are not merely seat warmers. However, some people believe that despite the significant involvement of women in the electoral machinery, their participation is predominantly restricted to roles as campaigners and ordinary voters. They also argue that most of them remain unaware of political upheaval and cast their votes based on the instruction received from particular entities. Hence, she believes that the 21st century brings changes to this situation, notably an increased awareness of the surrounding matters, particularly in political affairs at the grassroots level.

e. Innovative

Women with exceptional abilities always aim to be innovative in their management and administration. They proactively seek innovative alternatives to make their tasks easier instead of relying solely upon the provided facilities. They are also constantly dissatisfied with the outcomes achieved, which engages them to continuously think of new ideas that can bring changes to the task at hand, benefit the community, enhance the party as well as contribute to their country. However, only visionary women will constantly seek change in women's leadership and are not satisfied with only remaining in their comfort zones. These women will challenge themselves to achieve outcomes that are exponentially better over time. To achieve a more equitable future in politics, women need to be more open to change and embrace paradigm shifts among them. Women need to possess an open mind that can think critically and evaluate new things that bring various effects and influences—unconfined by outdated thinking that resists changes and renewal and responds negatively to it. Nor should they have minds that refuse to consider other new options and better alternatives rather than being bound by the deeply ingrained beliefs.

According to Zaharah Hassan (2004), the ability of a female leader to execute her political leadership processes relies on several factors, such as their skills in strategic planning, the intelligence to manipulate the authority at hand, charisma, and other instruments that are available to her. In the explanation of various leadership concepts above, there are a few elements that a leader must possess. First, an attractive personality and presence. An appealing physical personality can influence public perception of an individual's potential to be a leader. Second, knowledge that can build networks and the level of capability as a leader. The knowledge that a leader holds equips them to manage the organisation, party, and country with greater maturity and effectiveness.

f. Internalising Responsibility

Next, women need to understand that leadership entails a heavy responsibility and requires readiness and a willingness to accept all the risks and consequences associated with acting as a leader (Peggy, N. et al 2025). It means they should be willing to accept all the aftereffects resulting from their decisions and actions without shifting that responsibility to others, for them to bear the consequences. Regardless of whether the outcome is negative or positive, a leader must be able to shoulder the consequences. It is evident that leadership is not simply about holding a role or occupying the position and seat of a leader, but it means carrying out to the best of one's ability whatever must be done by someone in the position of a leader. Therefore, the performance and effectiveness of one's leadership are crucial for measuring and benchmarking leadership qualities. This is further reflected in Weber's (1968) perspective, which asserts that in the absence of power, leadership lacks meaning and legitimacy. Hence, when these attributes are exhibited by a leader, their leadership will become more effective and stronger. It is compulsory for anyone who plays the role of a leader to provide positive leadership that adds value and brings necessary progress. As long as that individual has not yet demonstrated the qualities that belong to a leader, taken actions to lead, and shown a leadership attitude that can be proud of and respected, they cannot or should not yet be considered as a leader.

g. Distinctive Personality

Additionally, image and appearance are very important for a leader because they will shape how their personality is perceived by the people and the members of their group of support. A wise leader would usually be able to comprehend the image that is liked and accepted by the people instead of forcing them to accept his or her image and appearance. Leaders are often placed at a higher level, respected, served as an *imam*, a peacemaker and a problem-solver (Zakaria et al 2024). To cultivate an individual as a potential leader, they must possess certain

qualities that allow them to be seen as having leadership abilities. This leadership ability is innate, built from a personality shaped by situational factors and conditions.

As highlighted by Hollands (1987), there are six types of personality that a leader should possess: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. A leader with a realistic personality shows attributes such as practicality, materialism and stability. A leader with an investigative personality tends to have qualities such as analytical, introverted, quiet, curious, meticulous and self-dependant. On the other hand, an artistic leader is creative, impulsive, idealistic, intuitive and emotional. A social leader loves to engage with people, is friendly, prudent in managing resources and values affiliation. Besides, a leader with an enterprising personality possesses traits such as being confident, strict, energetic and powerful. A conventional leader, on the other hand, is someone reliable and trustworthy, disciplined, organised, practical and efficient. As people's representatives, regardless of men or women, they must pay attention to their appearance because it will reflect the behaviour (Dalton & Klingemann 2009), style and charisma of effective leaders. As written by Idris Zakaria (1991) in the 'Farabi and the Malay Society' (*Farabi dan Masyarakat Melayu*), mentioning that a great leader should have three main criteria: knowledge and wisdom, physical perfection, noble character and courage. In al-Farabi's simpler words, a leader is not an ordinary person. Therefore, a future leader must be equipped with knowledge so that they can act with confidence and courage.

h. Knowledgeable

The concept of knowledge here is not restricted to only the knowledge acquired through formal education in school but also certain skills attained through managing an organisation, basic knowledge regarding their environment, as well as the customs and traditions of the surrounding community. Regardless of their gender, if a leader cannot master the knowledge, they will not succeed because they lack the confidence and courage to act. This is due to a lack of self-belief, in addition to the existence of doubt and pessimistic views about their abilities from others, especially their followers. Henceforth, a leader needs to possess extensive, in-depth and current knowledge, coupled with a visionary mindset and the ability to lead an organisation while functioning in a practical and flexible manner (Idris Zakaria: 1991).

Besides, a leader needs to have a good social skill. Leadership, at its core, is about achieving goals through others, which clearly indicates that a leader must possess a social skill. Leaders must be sensitive to the feelings and attitudes of others, assertive, and capable of effectively influencing those around them. A leader must also have strong administrative abilities. They should be skilled in anticipating, envisioning, initiating, planning, directing, solving, evaluating others, selecting, teaching, motivating, analysing, investigating, observing, improving, having a farsighted perspective, summarising, deciding, and ensuring that tasks are completed.

i. Strong Identity

A leader with a strong personal identity, such as competitiveness, resilience, perseverance and a high level of discernment, will enhance continuous productivity. A successful leader is efficient in utilising all available resources optimally while consistently monitoring and evaluating the progress of every programme and organisation. Furthermore, a leader should also exhibit leadership styles such as being courageous in trying new things and taking risks, having an open mindset (listening, accepting opinions, discussing and reaching consensus). They are also futuristic, creative, innovative, imaginative, assertive and determined to implement new ideas. Additionally, they also carry themselves with an appealing charisma (Idris Zakaria: 1991). For that reason, the success of a leader relies on the accomplishments achieved, not only in terms of quantity but also quality. The ability to plan and manage activities, attract loyal followers, firmness in standing by one's principles, and efficient in carrying out tasks are among factors that measure the effectiveness of a leader.

DISCUSSION

Many women with higher education and competence belong to the professional group. They possess high political awareness, consistently making early decisions and demonstrating the determination to engage in the political arena with specific objectives and aspirations. It has indirectly raised awareness and contributed to the increase in the number of professional women recognising the importance of their participation in politics, especially in striving for gender balance in decision-making (Ramli et al 2024 & Saidon et al 2017). The challenges faced by women are greater compared to men's leaders—however, women are seen as more capable of multi-tasking because they are required to manage their families, household, community, party and their country. Even though women were no longer confined to their primary roles as wives and mothers, these roles cannot simply be abandoned, as society will assess the extent to which female leaders are capable of handling tasks in both public and private spheres (Saidon et al 2017) & Saidon, N. (2022). It differs for male leaders as their roles gravitate towards the public sphere. Furthermore, their roles in the public sphere are not indispensable for them to shoulder, as men are often supported by women who juggle the roles of daughters, wives and mothers. Women are not merely candidates to be underestimated or considered as just a requirement, but rather, they are now more prepared and have a better understanding of politics as they possess a strong awareness of political issues and are sensitive to gender-related matters. Therefore, empowering the involvement of women in the national legislative body (Parliament) and local government (State Legislative Assembly) can not only transform the current political landscape but also change society's perception regarding women's capabilities as leaders. However, it is often women with exceptional qualities who are more likely to be selected as candidates for leadership positions (Tuanku Jaafar, Wan Junaidi, 2014). In contrast, women with more ordinary traits may encounter challenges in being chosen as candidates (Zakuan, 2023). When organisational culture greatly influences female leadership, decision-makers tend to favour male values, as the majority of Malaysia's Members of Parliament are male representatives (Yusoff et al. 2016). The social construction pertaining to gender, with its specific role divisions as well as societal expectations towards men and women, have been carried to the workplace. This causes individuals affected (regardless of men or women) to retain these expectations due to the prevailing social and organisational realities. Since the majority of founders or the leaders of an organisation are men, the culture embedded in the organisation logically appears more inclined towards their values. Previous studies often discuss gender issues from the perspective of external factors but place less emphasis on the internal factors pertaining to women themselves.

In this regard, women need to play their role in order to step out of their comfort zones and familiar positions. Women who dare to stand out are truly prepared to take over the leadership from men, following their own path through women's views. Hence, empowering women's involvement in the national legislative body (Parliament) and local government (State Legislative Assembly) will not only change the current political situation but also challenge the stereotypes that people have against the competency of women to become leaders. The development and empowerment of women's participation in politics and organisation can significantly contribute to the stability of the national leadership, which is perceived as a means capable of elevating and harmonising the leadership dynamics alongside men. Talent, competency and expertise owned by women are at the same level as men. In fact, it has been proven that women are also capable of moving and leading a party and organisation excellently. They are capable of enhancing productivity, yielding long-term socioeconomic returns, and contributing to human capital development. Women need to master the political arena just as they have mastered the academic world in Malaysia today.



CONCLUSION

Female members of the parliament also perform their duties similar to the male members of the parliament at the local, parliamentary and even international levels. As aligned with the National Policy on Women to increase a total of 30 per cent of women's participation in diversified fields a reality, collaboration from various parties is very important. This collaboration is vital to achieving and strengthening women's involvement by providing more chances and rejecting elements that discriminate against women. Similar to male leaders, female leaders also possess high competitiveness. In fact, they are not only capable of performing various tasks but are leading and entering various fields, institutions, organisations, and more. Public impression and perception concerning women's competency should be dismissed as the role of women is now crucial in the development of numerous sectors, including politics, economics, education and others.

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