

EMPOWER: Women's Representation is still too low

Press Statement

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The 13th General Election was decided by 85% of 13.3 million voters; over 52% of the voters were women. Both parties courted women for their votes and nominated more women candidates. While the percentage increase of women candidates seems impressive, less than ten percent of the candidates for parliament or state assemblies were women. The portion of legislators who are women continues to be low; ten percent of MPs and 11% of state assembly members are women. That being said most incumbent female legislators who contested were elected.

In GE13, 570 candidates ran for 222 parliament seats. Ten percent of the candidates were women. As compared to GE12 the number of women contesting increased by 17%, 56 women in 2013 and 48 in 2008. Seven independents ran in GE13 and two in GE12. Thus, the political parties increased their nominations of women candidates by only seven percent.

Despite the increase in women standing for parliament, in both GE12 and GE13 only 23 were elected. The successful women parliamentarians are from the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), People's Justice Party (PKR), United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), United Traditional Bumiputera Party (PBB) and Sabah United Party (PBS). Barisan Nasional contributed 14 women, which UMNO contributed 57%, PBB contributed 29%, PBS contributed 14%. Pakatan Rakyat contributed 9, DAP contributed 45%, PAS 22% and PKR contributed 33%. All DAP women contesting for MP won.

At the state level, 1322 candidates ran for 505 state assembly seats in all the states other than Sarawak. Nine percent of the candidates were women. As compared to GE12 the number of women contesting increased by 31%, 113 women in 2013 and 81 in 2008. 57 out of 113 women contesting were elected. Only one woman contested in Terengganu; she lost. The other state assemblies have at least two women members. 26 women were elected from Barisan Nasional and its friendly parties, 25 from UMNO and 1 from PBS. Pakatan Rakyat contributed 31 women assembly persons, 17 from DAP, 6 from PAS and 8 from PKR. 52% women candidates of Barisan Nasional were elected, 94% women candidates of DAP, 33% women candidates of PAS and 42% of women candidates of PKR. At parliament level 18 incumbents contested and 16 (89%) were re-elected. This seems to indicate that these incumbents had performed well as representatives and have gained the respect and trust from their constituencies. Teresa Kok, MP for Seputih, is a good example of a successful candidate. She won the election with a majority of 51552 votes, out of a total of 86114 votes.

What are the factors that make a winnable candidate? How does a party ensure that its women candidates have a good chance at winning? Apart from being nominated, support from the political parties is just as important. Candidates, regardless of gender, are generally expected to have had experience on the ground working with the constituents of their expected seat. Women candidates should be provided with the resources, skills training, and mentoring to raise the various issues affecting their constituencies. They need the party's resources, infrastructure and machinery to provide services and to meet the needs of their electorate.

Having had this experience, the candidates should also then be fielded by their respective party in places where they have been working with people on the ground. Unfortunately, internal horse-trading and negotiations within political parties on seat allocations mean that women often lose out. Four women trained by Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) in its Women's

Political Participation programme were put up as candidates at parliamentary level. Two more were nominated for state-level seats. One woman was not nominated because of seat negotiation. At the very last minute two of the trained women were shifted to new constituencies where they had never worked before and did not know the respective electorate. These two women subsequently turned down the nomination offer.

This “parachuting” of candidates to constituencies unfamiliar to them should be avoided as candidates need time to work on the ground to understand local issues in order to be able to represent the local population and their needs. It also tends to adversely affect a candidate’s chances of winning. A longer campaign period of at least 21 days could negate this to a certain extent as it would give more time for the electorate to know the candidates.

EMPOWER congratulates and welcomes all the new Parliamentarians and would like to work with all parties in order to push for a gender agenda for a better future. Regardless of winning or losing the election we welcome ALL women candidates to share their experiences in order to learn and to move forward to having more women’s representation.