

Electoral Politics is No Place for Sexism

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Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) is appalled at the level of sexism and misogyny directed against Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud, the Pakatan Rakyat candidate for the Teluk Intan by-election. While many of us cynically predicted that she would be hit with smear attacks from her opponents and sexist treatment in the media, it is disheartening that her supposed allies have also gleefully joined in sexist behaviour towards her.

While the circulation of the photos alleged to be of her in a bikini was deplorable, so were the catcalls by male Pakatan supporters and the constant references to her attractiveness by Pakatan leaders during ceramahs. Instead of joking about Dyana Sofya's marriage availability and labelling her looks as a "bonus" for the Teluk Intan constituents, these political leaders should show the decorum expected of their positions and talk about matters of substance such as corruption or the rising cost of living. They are hardly better than some Barisan National leaders who are urging the Gerakan candidate to get involved in the mud-slinging and attacking Dyana's mother in a bizarre display of collective punishment.

Dyana Sofya's experience is unfortunately familiar to EMPOWER, from the women whom we trained as potential leaders and election candidates. Women face multiple forms of discrimination within political parties and in the larger society, from gender stereotyping to sexual harassment. As election candidates women tend to be put in less winnable seats and receive fewer resources from their parties, or "packaged" as candidates by their parties based on their physical appearance and perceived feminine values.

Challenges faced by women candidates come not just from their political opponents, but also from entrenched sexism in popular media. The media coverage of Dyana Sofya's campaign, with a few exemplary exceptions, has focused on looks rather than substance. Some may argue that journalists are only following the example set by how political parties frame their candidates' campaigns. EMPOWER contends that it is the duty of the media to look beyond the surface and question what is put forward by all political parties. We recall the Batu Sapi by-election of 2010, where the media coverage of BN candidate Linda Tsen Thau Lin focused on her widowhood, rather than her political background and previous experience in Parti Bersatu Sabah as the Deputy Wanita Chief for Elopura.

These barriers to women's political participation are real and are difficult to dismantle. Despite lip service given by government and political leaders to women's leadership potential, we need only to turn to the abysmal numbers to assess actual commitment in practice: 23 women Parliamentarians, 58 women State Assembly members. In 2013, 56 women ran for Parliament, and at the State Assembly level only 113 out of 1322 candidates were women.

Young women in particular are judged more harshly based on their youth and perceived inexperience. Political culture in Malaysia is not only male-dominated but also patriarchal: obsessed with hierarchy and false standards of masculinity, hostile towards perceived threats to its dominance. The 2007 "bocor" remarks made against Fong Po Kuan, then Malaysia's youngest MP, exemplify this poisonous culture. Also a symptom is the rise of political violence and thuggery by proxy, where we see individuals engaging in intimidation tactics on the tacit

encouragement of the political party they support. However, if the nation is to progress then the old guard must make way for the young and engage with them as equals. Win or lose, EMPOWER hopes that Dyana Sofya's boldness will encourage young women leaders and their allies to take up the fight.

EMPOWER emphasises as well that it is not enough for political parties to put up women candidates and hope that the problem resolves itself. The government, state institutions, and political parties must also be committed to the larger battle of fighting multiple forms of discrimination against women. How many bright, promising women like Dyana Sofya lost out on opportunities due to poverty or violence in the home?