

International Women's Day 2014: Inspiring Women's Political Participation

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This year, on 8th March, Pusat Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) looks forward to the first International Women's Day (IWD) since Malaysia's 13th General Election (GE13) as a day to take stock of women's political participation in the country.

In October 2013, the World Economic Forum released the Global Gender Gap Report for 2013, which measures women's access to resources and opportunities in individual countries, relative to men. The report's Gender Gap Index looked at several indicators: economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Malaysia slid drastically in the Gender Gap Index, from an overall ranking of 72 out of 115 countries in 2006 to a ranking of 102 out of 136 in 2013.

Malaysia's score for political empowerment was abysmal. Our country is ranked at 121 out of 136 countries, putting us in the lower third of the countries ranked and the lowest-ranked in Southeast Asia except for Brunei Darussalam (ranked 135). This means that Malaysia lags far behind many of its neighbours in terms of gender parity at the highest decision-making level, with grossly uneven ratios of women to men in minister-level positions and in parliamentary positions.

The 2013 Global Gender Gap Report's findings corroborate EMPOWER's research into women's political participation in Malaysia's electoral system. Only 10 percent of MPs elected in 2013 and 11 percent of state assemblypersons are women. In GE13, only 10 percent of the 570 candidates for 222 parliament seats were women. The 56 women candidates in GE13 represent an increase of 17% from 48 women candidates in the 12th General Election (GE12), however in both elections only 23 women were elected to parliament. At the state level, only 9 percent out of the 1322 candidates who ran for 505 state assembly seats were women, with 57 out of the 117 women candidates elected into office.[\[1\]](#)

Barriers to women's political participation are well-documented, even if they may not be explicitly framed as gender issues. Attacks against Teresa Kok over her Chinese New Year video invoked a form of physical violence associated with violent retaliation against women alleged to be stepping out of line, including in domestic violence. EMPOWER notes that she was the only woman on a portrayed on a banner attacking Opposition leaders in February, and the only one threatened with a slap.

Other barriers that received little substantive discussion include the disproportionate attention given to women's looks and moral virtues, as well as the tendency of political parties to "parachute" women candidates into unwinnable seats. EMPOWER is disheartened that a leader of Chew Mei Fun's capabilities was put in a position where she would most likely lose the Kajang by-election. In GE13, some women were moved out from constituencies where they had been serving the people and made to contest in constituencies they had never worked in, lowering their chances of being elected.

However, on this International Women's Day, EMPOWER would also like to pay tribute to the women who succeeded despite the odds. Out of the women trained by EMPOWER in its Women's Political Participation programme, two were elected into Parliament: Alice Lau Kiong Yieng (Lanang) and Kasthuri Patto (Batu Kawan). Three of our participants were elected into State Assemblies: Tiew Way Keng (Teratai), Wong Shu Qi (Senai), and Kamache Doray Rajoo (Sabai). Further, three women who participated in our programme were appointed as local councilors: Wasanthee Shanti, Sarimah Lisut, and Ruthira Surasan. Other participants have been quietly making a significant difference in their communities.

We congratulate these women, and all Malaysian women who are fighting for their right to full and equal participation in political life. EMPOWER hopes that their stories will serve as inspiration to women at all levels of society.

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*For more facts on women's political participation in Malaysia, please visit our **Equality Under Construction** website: <http://euc.empowermalaysia.org>*

[1] "Women's representation still too low", EMPOWER, 20 May 2013, <http://empowermalaysia.org/blog/2013/05/20/empower-womens-representation-still-low/>