Narrowing the gender gap in Malaysia

A look at how policy and advocacy initiatives have helped narrow the gender gap in Malaysia.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Malaysian government took steps to bring about equal opportunities for men and women. One of those measures was to invest heavily in health and education infrastructure by putting a school and a fully-equipped hospital within five kilometres of every home in Peninsula Malaysia. In East Malaysia the infrastructure may not have been as good but it was compensated with residential schools.

“What that meant was that a lot of women got a basic education. Today women constitute nearly 66 per cent of university enrolment in Malaysia, which is actually a reverse gender problem,” says Saira Shameem, executive director of the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). “Because of the long-term investment in women’s human development in Malaysia, we were able to change ‘business-as-usual’ in the workforce as well as in politics, and recreate something else in its place.”

One of the main challenges to the development of women’s roles in Malaysia, however, is the increasing Wahabi influence on Islam. “This is the result of a large number of free scholarships offered to Malaysian theology students attending Al Azhar University in Cairo,” Shameem told INSEAD Knowledge. “The Arabisation of Malaysian Islam has led to increasing repression and a narrow interpretation of a Malay culture that was previously very open. This is linked to alcohol consumption and the threatened caning of a Malay woman caught consuming beer; head covering; lack of intercultural understanding and acceptance; taboo on sex, polygamy, and young people and their sexuality; and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups.”
Nonetheless, Malaysian women continue to occupy increasing leadership roles in both the private sector and within politics. In the largest opposition party, women make up 30 per cent of the decision makers, both within the party and in parliament. Women constitute about 10 per cent of parliamentarians and only eight per cent of state level legislatures (which is the next level of elected officials) compared to the global average of 16 per cent. “So we still have more to do in terms of breaking the political glass ceiling, despite the fact that it is a woman that is leading the main opposition party in Malaysia,” says Shameem.

**A new way of doing politics**

Until a decade ago, obstacles such as the old ways of doing politics of rising through the ranks, gender discrimination within parties, and the old boys’ network prevented the increase of women’s participation.

In 1999, Shameem became part of the group called The Women’s Candidacy Initiative (WCI) which ran the first woman candidate on a women’s platform under the opposition banner.

“We wanted to increase women’s participation in politics. The aim of the initiative was to change the nature of politics so that women will find it more accessible and hence more would want to participate,” she says.

Although the WCI candidate didn’t win the seat, history had been made. The party polled more than 40 per cent of the vote in the constituency, reducing the winning margin for the ruling coalition from 38,000 in the 1995 general elections to 8,800 in 1999, giving the candidate for the ruling Barisan National, who was the former transport minister, a run for his money.

After the elections ended, the group refused to disband even though they were a campaign coordinating committee. Shameem thinks it was because they had created a positive environment. For example, she had a three month-old baby while she was the campaign manager and the committee members would come to her house for meetings so that she didn’t have to leave home. “It was about reorganising dairies and logistics in order to make it possible for women with multiple responsibilities to participate in the events. We wanted to construct politics on our own terms and create an environment within our comfort zone.”

The following year, the Islamic Party PAS opened up the party to female candidates. “We like to think that the positive experience of seeing how WCI worked, had helped open the doors further to PAS’ own thinking around the need to include women candidates,” Shameem says. “PAS later went on to consider non-Muslim candidates to run under their banner. That kind of reinterpretation of politics was indeed very positive.”

**Redefining the tech sector**

Women constitute some 30 per cent of technology employees in Malaysia, compared to just 20 per cent in the West. Ulf Mellström, professor in gender and technology studies at the Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, who studied the changing landscape in Malaysia, told INSEAD Knowledge that women are slowly but surely redefining traditional gender roles in technology especially in regard to western-based ideas around the deep symbolic connection between technology and masculinity.

“The traditional manufacturing connection of men and technology developed throughout a long history of industrialism in the West is not as evident in Malaysia,” he says. “The country has more or less leapfrogged into a post-industrialised state since the 1980s. Masculinity is not as closely connected to machinery and technology as it is in the West.”

Several factors may have caused this phenomenon. One is a race-based quota system in higher education favouring the indigenous Malay population and especially the more industrious young women who choose IT-related careers as a preferable career choice, says Mellström. Another is the distinction between indoor- and outdoor-related technologies with indoor technologies being connected to women and outdoor technologies to men.

“In Malaysia, masculinity is connected to other central values such as spiritual devotion, fatherhood, and family values that are more important than a marketplace manhood connected to engineering competencies. This leaves room for women to enter a workplace arena that is still heavily dominated by males in the West,” argues Mellström. He adds that Malaysia is still very much a male-dominated society but that is slowly changing. “There are huge generational gaps in Malaysia when it comes to attitudes. However, young women today are much
more self aware and concerned about creating a life space for self independence."

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