

## Can Women in Malaysian be a Changemakers? Political Involvement and Decision-Making

Shadiya Mohamed S. Baqutayan, Rosesyafiqqa Baiduri Abd  
Razak

Razak Faculty of Technology and Informatics, University Technology Malaysia (UTM) UTM,  
Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, Malaysia  
Email: Shadiya.kl@utm.my

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### Abstract

The National Women Policy aims to prepare a conducive environment for women that are more women-friendly to elevate their status in all aspects including politics. However, despite the statement, women are still lacking behind in the political sector in Malaysia. Indeed, the Malaysian women have been shown to outperform men in the academic and even professional job market. Despite the supposed superiority of Malaysian women's intellectual abilities, the number of women who are allowed to participate in nation building is abysmally low. Malaysian women are absent from many leadership positions, the economic market, politics, and/or decision-making. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the challenges women face in terms of political participation and decision-making. The data were randomly distributed to the public to obtain an unbiased result from the community in Malaysia. Approximately 200 respondents were contacted through WhatsApp, email, and other platforms, yielding a response rate of 58% (116 respondents). The data were analyzed using SPSS to achieve the objectives. Thus, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the variables of the study. The results suggest that demographic characteristics such as education level and monthly income are important components that significantly influence women's political involvement and decision-making. In detail, there is a significant correlation at the 0.05 levels between political engagement and respondents' level of education (0.214\*) as well as decision-making and respondents' education level (0.188\*). This results proof how respondents' background influences their political engagement and decision-making. Moreover, decision-making is significantly related to political involvement, women who are able to make a decision have more power to participate in politics than women who are unable to do so. This study can provide insight into the landscape of women's participation in politics and decision-making and ways to support them; educating them can improve their political involvement and decision-making. Therefore, this study has value to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

including women, that in return will improve gender equality, women political involvement, and decision-making.

**Keyword:** Women Empowerment, Political Involvement, Decision-Making, Gender Equality

### **Introduction**

In democratic societies, the quantity and quality of women's active participation in public life are essential. Long ago, in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN) clearly stated that maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all spheres is necessary to achieve full development, the well-being of society and peaceful living (Ballington, 2005). Many countries in the world have ratified the Convention and have taken various measures to increase women's political participation, including Malaysia. According to the press release at Ipsos Sdn Bhd (2020), Malaysians believe that women's representation in politics is very important to achieve gender equality. However, the low participation is a concern, so Malaysia should address this issue and make more efforts to help women in Malaysia have a greater say in all areas. For this reason, Malaysia has planned nine objectives to achieve gender equality as envisioned by the United Nations SDGs. Among these nine objectives, the fifth objective serves as an indicator of the percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments. However, regardless of the objectives, efforts to bring more women into parliaments do not appear to be bearing fruit. To date, no study has explicitly identified the reasons why some countries elect women and others do not (Windsor et al., 2020). In examining the cause of gender differences from a psychological perspective, Guimond et al (2007) found that the general perception of gender differences in a society reflects the process of stereotyping among people, in which members of each gender group adopt certain stereotypical characteristics. This means that Malaysian women's lack of participation in politics and decision-making is a result of the cultural stereotyping of women as childbearers and homemakers.

It has been noted that Malaysia is one of the countries that score the highest for a culture with high power distance (Hofstede, 1980). This is because societies function based on certain norms that legitimize power differentials (Brockner et al., 2001). Consequently, society is structured in such a way that social comparisons between men and women are rarely made. As a result, one would be hard pressed to find evidence that compares women's achievements with those of their male counterparts, especially when it comes to political participation and decision-making. According to Kennedy (2002), the stereotyping of women's roles and attitudes by the culture of great power distance is obviously reflected in the Malaysian political structure, which is dominated by men, while women play only a complementary role. Although women make up about 50 percent of the Malaysian electorate, the role they are given in decision-making processes does not reflect this numerical strength.

Indeed, the National Women's Policy aims to create an enabling environment for women; this includes implementing pro-women policies and creating laws to improve the status and welfare of women in all areas, including politics, but women are still underrepresented in the political sector in Malaysia. Among the 67 seats in the Senate, only 13 are women, while of the 222 seats in the Lower House, only 32 are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). To add salt to the wound, the number of female cabinet ministers has never exceeded 3 since 1957 (Faizli, 2017), until recently in YAB Tan Sri Dato' Hj. Muhyiddin Bin Hj. Mohd. Yassin. He

added two more women to the cabinet, bringing the total to 5 women out of 32 ministers (Rasmi, 2021). Although Malaysia has made efforts to improve the status of women, the low number of women who have the opportunity to contribute to national development is at odds with these efforts. It seems that men have always dominated Malaysian politics. It is important for the political system of any democratic country that both women and men have sufficient opportunities to participate and be represented in political affairs and institutions (Yusoff et al., 2016). Indeed, Gupta et al (1999) mention that some societies attach great importance to equality because of its link to social justice and fairness. They emphasize that policies that promote equality emphasize discrimination against groups based on their categorization, in this case gender. They also emphasize that policies aimed at improving equality can have a positive impact on societal well-being. Therefore, this article will look into this issue then analyze the difficulty of women's political participation and decision-making in Malaysia.

### Research Methodology

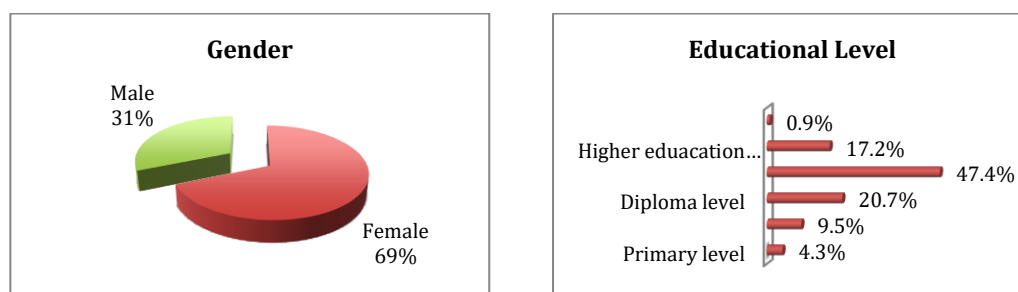
An online survey was designed for this study. The data was randomly distributed to the public to get an unbiased result from the community in Malaysia. Approximately 200 respondents were contacted through WhatsApp, email, and other platforms, resulting in a response rate of 58% (116 respondents). The study is purely quantitative, i.e., it captures the different views on women as decision makers in Malaysia. Data were collected using a questionnaire. The instruments used in this study were taken from existing and well-tested survey instruments. The data were then analyzed using SPSS to achieve the objectives. Thus, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the variables of the study

### Findings and Results

This section discusses the main findings, focusing on the identified patterns and themes related to participants' views on empowerment. Nevertheless, the findings of this study focus only on the personal dimension of women's empowerment, as there is a need to document what causes women to feel inferior.

### Respondents' Background

Figure (1) shows the distribution of key participant characteristics or respondent background by gender, age, marital status, education level, income level, etc.



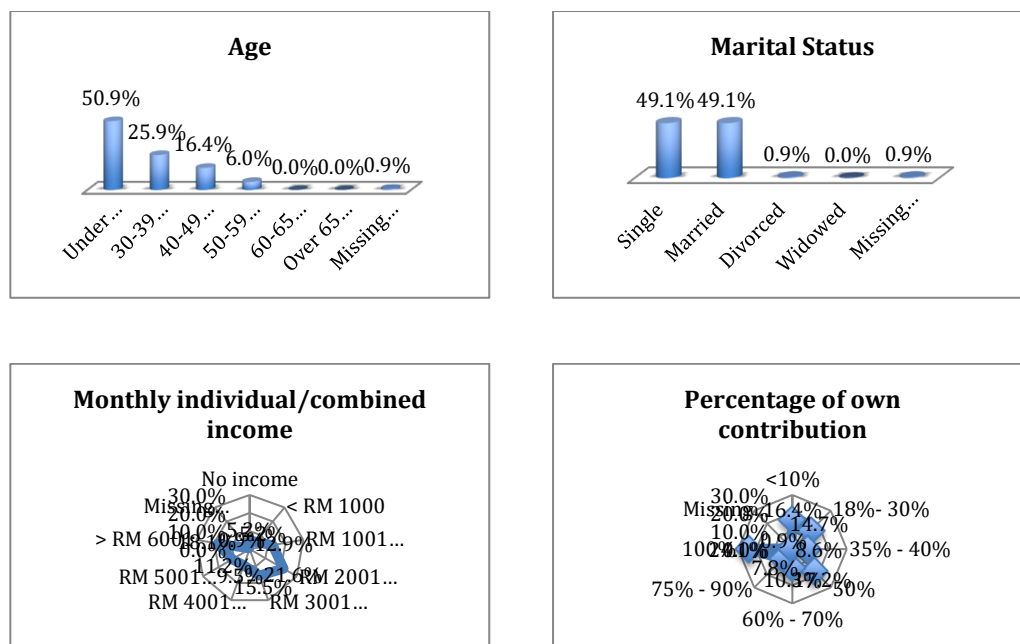


Fig. 1. Respondents Background

A descriptive analysis was performed based on the demographic information of the respondents (Figure 1). The result showed that 69.0% of the 116 participants in the survey were female and 31.0 were male. 50.9% of the participants were under 30 years old, 25.9% were between 30 and 39 years old, 16.4% were between 40 and 49 years old, 6.0% were between 50 and 59 years old, and 0% of the participants were 60 years old and older. In terms of educational status, 4.3% and 9.5% of participants had primary and secondary school degrees, respectively, 20.7% had diploma degrees, 47.4% had bachelor's degrees, and 17.2% had graduate degrees (master's & PhD). This indicates that almost all are educated and the majorities have a university degree; the level of education is an important factor for them to claim empowerment. Regarding marital status, 49.1% of the 116 respondents were single, 49.1% were married, 0.9% was divorced, and 0% was widowed. The results show that 5.2% of the respondents have no income at all, also 5.2% of the respondents have income less than RM1000, 12.9% of the participants have income between RM1001-RM2000 and 21.6% of the participants have income between RM2001-RM3000, and 15.5% of participants have income between RM3001-RM4000, 9.5% of participants have income between RM4001-RM5000, 11.2% of participants have income between RM5001-RM6000, and 18.1% of participants reported that their income is above RM6001. To put this income level in perspective, the respondents' contribution to the household was measured and the results showed that 16.4% of the respondents contribute less than 10% to the household, 14.7% of the respondents contribute between 10-30% to the household, plus 8.6% of the respondents contribute 35-40% to the household and 17.2% of the respondents indicated that they contribute 50% to the household. In addition, 10.3% of respondents contribute 60-70% to the household, 7.8% of respondents contribute 75-90% to the household, and 24.1% contribute 100% to the household.

**The Abundance of Women in Decision-Making**

Women's involvement in decision-making has been explained in different ways in the literature; what is relevant to this study is a specific task where decision-making takes place

at home. The items of the questionnaire were rated on a 3-Likert scale with a score of 1 for "husband," score of 2 for "respondent and husband together," and score of 3 for "respondent herself." The details as follows:

Table 1

*Abundance Of Women In Decision-Making*

Items	Missing Value	Husband	Respondent herself	Respondent & husband jointly	Total %
Decision on how many children to have	41.4	55.2	0	3.4	100.0
Decision on the education of children	41.4	55.2	0	3.4	100.0
Decision on managing savings/loan	41.4	52.6	0	6.0	100.0
Decision on managing how much of income should be kept for consumption in the household	41.4	55.2	0	3.4	100.0
Decision on managing how to spend the money made from work	41.4	55.2	0	3.4	100.0
Decision on transfer of property to a relative or other person	41.4	48.3	0.9	9.5	100.0
Decision on marriage of family member	41.4	52.6	0.9	5.2	100.0
Managing house need in terms of:					
	41.4	52.6	0.9	5.2	100.0
– What food to buy and consume					
– Purchase of furniture for the house	41.4	49.1	0.9	8.6	100.0
– Purchase and sale of large livestock	41.4	50.9	0	7.8	100.0
– Purchase/rent and/or sale of home to stay	41.4	47.4	0.9	10.3	100.0
– Purchase of land	41.4	50.9	0	7.8	100.0
– Housework and care of the person	41.4	51.7	0	6.9	100.0

Making decisions equally is the "socially desired response" for couples today, but it is not necessarily the reality. Therefore, participants in this study (women) were asked to give their opinion on who makes the most decisions at home (husband, wife, or/and husband and wife together). The results showed that most decisions are made by the husband and to a lesser extent by the husband and wife together; nothing is made by the wife (respondents' view). This is similar to the study conducted by Blood and Wolfe (1960), individuals whose income

was higher than their partner's generally held the decision-making power. This is consistent with resource and exchange theories that explain men's power in the family as a function of their greater financial contribution to the household (Becker 1974; Coltrane 1996; Ferree 1990). For example, men who earn a living often have the final say in financial decisions in the family and are more likely to spend perceived joint money without asking their female partners (Burgoyne et al., 2006). Given this association, a greater right to the final say in family decisions has been interpreted as an expression of power.

Table 2

*The Mean for Women's Decision-Making*

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Decision on how many children to have	116	0	2	0.62	0.554
Decision on the education of children	116	0	2	0.62	0.554
Decision on managing savings/loan	116	0	2	0.65	0.594
Decision on managing how much of income should be kept for consumption in the household	116	0	2	0.62	0.554
Decision on managing how to spend the money made from work	116	0	2	0.62	0.554
Decision on transfer of property to a relative or other person	116	0	3	0.70	0.675
Decision on marriage of family member	116	0	3	0.66	0.620
Managing house need in terms of:					
– What food to buy and consume	116	0	3	0.66	0.620
– Purchase of furniture for the house	116	0	3	0.69	0.665
– Purchase and sale of large livestock	116	0	2	0.66	0.618
– Purchase/rent and/or sale of home to stay	116	0	3	0.71	0.685
– Purchase of land	116	0	2	0.66	0.618
– Housework and care of the person	116	0	2	0.66	0.606
Valid N (listwise)	116				

The above table (2) aims to measure the mean of women's participation in household decision making; the results reaffirm that women depend on their husbands to make decisions about any household activities. This finding endorse that the gender system, that is, processes that define men and women as significantly different, may be at the root of the failure of relative resource theories to explain persistent gender inequality in families (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Men can be viewed as the household head who ultimately wields power in the family, regardless of their relative contribution to family income.

Table 3  
Respondents' Background in relation to Decision-Making

		Gender	Age	Marital status	Education level	Monthly income	Percentage of own contribution
Total Mean Decision Making	Pearson Correlation	-0.136	0.149	0.085	.188*	0.117	-0.081
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.145	0.111	0.362	0.044	0.213	0.385
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table (3) above shows that there is a significant correlation at the 0.05 level only between decision making and respondents' education level (0.188\*); respondents with high education are more involved in household decision making than respondents without education. This is consistent with the study of Verdú & Escardibul, (2016), according to which the level of education of both husband and wife has a positive effect on decision making in relation to three areas of expenditure: daily purchases, expensive purchases of durables and significant expenditure on children.

#### The Paucity of Women in Political Involvement

Women's low participation in politics was measured using four Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4). Scores were based on an unambiguous statement calling on governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures; the result is shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
*The Paucity Of Women In Political Involvement*

Items	Missing value	Strongly disagree	Partly disagree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Total
Women should have freedom from forced labor	43.1	0	3.4	17.2	36.2	100.0
Women should have equal access as men to justice system	43.1	0	3.4	11.2	42.2	100.0
The political sphere should have greater gender equality	43.1	0	18.5	53.1	36.2	100.0
Women should have equal representation as men in key decision-making positions in civil society.	43.1	0	1.7	19.0	36.2	100.0
Women should have equal representation as men in key decision-making positions in the public sector.	43.1	0	2.6	16.4	37.9	100.0

There is a lot of talk about the 30% representation of women in decision-making positions, but nothing is done because men do not want to give up political power (Isnin, 2013). Thus, the participants of this study (women) were asked to express their opinions about women's participation in politics. The results showed that the majority strongly agreed with all the items listed in the table above; for example, they strongly agreed with equal access to the judicial system, equal representation in key decision-making positions in civil society, and equal representation in the public sector. This result could not be accepted because women are culturally viewed as subordinate to men, meek, submissive, and loving, as opposed to men, who are seen as headstrong, strong, and aggressive. Therefore, as indicated by Ivy Josiah (2013), we cannot wait to change the men but need to explore the analysis and recommendations as to why the representation of women in Malaysia is still low. Respondents background in relation to political involvement were studied as follow:

Table 5

*Respondents' Background in Relation to Political Involvement*

		Gender	Age	Marital status	Education level	Monthly income	Percentage of contribution
Political Involvement	Pearson Correlation	-0.132	0.183	0.114	.214*	.189*	-0.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.158	0.051	0.224	0.021	0.042	0.451
	N	116	115	116	116	116	116

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*.

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Education has long been cited as a predictor of political attitudes and behaviors. In a study by Almond & Verba (2015), education level was found to have the greatest influence on a person's level of civic culture. Indeed, Converse (1972, p. 324) long ago described the overwhelming importance of formal education to political participation, concluding "education is everywhere the universal solvent and the relationship is always in the same direction. The above table (5) shows that there is a significant correlation at the 0.05 levels between political engagement and respondents' level of education (0.214\*) and political engagement and respondents' monthly income (.189\*); respondents with high education and respondents with better income are more interested in political engagement. This is also consistent with Hillygus' (2005) study that education provides both the necessary skills for political engagement and the knowledge for understanding and accepting democratic principles. Income is closely related to the variable of political behavior. According to Yang Zhong (2018), people with a higher income bracket are more conservative in their political orientation. However, there is also another argument that people with higher income are less interested in politics because they are too busy making money (Walter Lippmann, 1927). This is probably true because higher income people are busy pursuing financial and business opportunities and are less interested in politics and public affairs (Walter Lippmann, 1927). Another possible reason why lower-income people are more interested in politics and public affairs is that they have more problems and complaints about their poor economic conditions and hope that the government will address their concerns (Kristof & WuDunn, 1995).



### Women's Participation in Politics and Decision-Making

Women's decision making in relation to political involvement were measured and the result is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

#### *Decision Making in Relation to Political Involvement*

		Decision Making	Political Involvement
Decision Making	Pearson Correlation	1	.931**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	116	116
Political Involvement	Pearson Correlation	.931**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	116	116

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to Julie Pallant (2011), the output requires consideration of the magnitude of the value of the correlation coefficient, which can range from -1.00 to 1.00 and indicates the strength of the relationship between the two variables. A correlation coefficient of 0 means that there is no relationship at all, a correlation coefficient of 1.0 means a perfect positive correlation, and a value of -1.0 means a perfect negative correlation. How do you interpret values between 0 and 1? Different authors suggest different interpretations; however, Cohen (1988) suggests the following guidelines:  $r=.10$  to  $.29$  (small),  $r=.30$  to  $.49$  (medium), and  $r=.50$  to  $1.0$  (large). Thus, in this study, there is a large correlation between the two variables (.931\*\*), indicating a fairly strong relationship between decision-making and political participation. Someone who can make a decision has more power to participate in politics than someone who cannot.

Out of the above table the following figure was indicated.

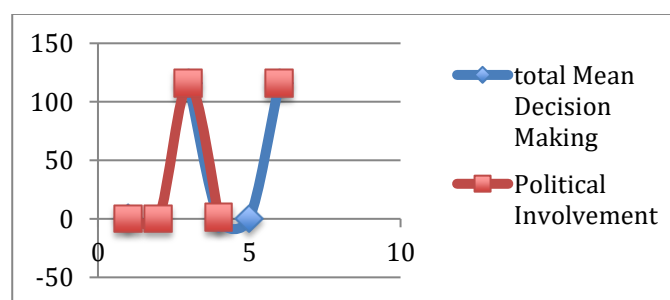


Fig. 2. Decision Making in Relation to Political Involvement

### Discussion and Conclusion

Political participation is not only important for men, but also for women; the importance of women's political participation is based on both intrinsic and instrumental arguments. The human rights perspective emphasizes that women, who make up more than half of the world's population, deserve equal participation and representation. The latter points out that women's political participation is essential because men and women have different ideas and concepts of politics due to their gender and gender roles. The assumption, then, is that the inclusion of women in politics would bring a different focus and values to politics. Similarly,

Dahlerup & Freidenvall (2003) argues that women have the right to half the seats because they make up half the population (the equity argument). And they added that, a movement towards the equal representation of women could take either an incremental or a fast movement in the country (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2003).

Thus women need to be empowered politically; the empowerment of women and their political participation is an important topic that has been talked about for a long time. Although the term itself was not widely used in the past, there was a sense that women should be empowered even before they had the right to vote. As of 2019, 49.584% of the world's population is female (The World Bank, 2019). Although many efforts have been and are still being made to improve the status of women around the world, the situation of women in the political sphere is still backward in most countries around the world. In Malaysia, although 48.6% of the population is female (The World Bank, 2019), only 11.5% of the representatives in state legislative assemblies, 14.4% in the House of Representatives, and 19.4% in the Senate. This ranks the country 140th out of 192 countries (Inter-Parliament Union, 2019). According to Ipsos (2020), Malaysians believe that it is very important for women to be represented in government and politics to promote women's empowerment. These data are alarming because Malaysia should seize the opportunity to tap into this human resource to politically empower women in Malaysia, thus, this study sought to examine the obstacles women face in political participation and decision-making.

I believe that women's participation in politics can be a productive tool in answering the question of what it means to be an engaged citizen in today's world. Women are increasingly engaged in politics and actively seeking political office, but this has not yet led to effective decision-making and representation in public office. Although there are some positive results that show women doing well in politics, women's participation is low in many countries. I hope that a more realistic understanding of women's participation in politics will improve the effectiveness of government in these countries. This country has high levels of women's political engagement and gender equity, but low representation of women in politics and decision-making. The goal is to enable governments to meet the needs of their citizens. This study examined how gender differences affect women's political participation and decision-making. The result showed that women who are able to make a decision have more power to participate in politics than women who are unable to do so. In addition, there is a significant relationship between decision-making ability and respondents' education level, as well as a significant relationship between political engagement and respondents' education level and monthly income. Based on these findings, the researcher concluded first, policymakers should adopt action plans for recruiting equal numbers of women and men to make party politics more inclusive. Second, tools for gender monitoring in politics should be developed. Third, training on emotional intelligence, decision-making, capacity building skills, problem-solving capabilities, and leadership skills should be applied. Finally, funds should be allocated for further research on the implementation and impact of gender equality, women's political participation, and decision-making.

### **Contribution of The Study**

This study contributes to enriching knowledge on women's empowerment, decision-making, and political participation in Malaysia and has contributed to the literature on political issues in Malaysia. Furthermore, the low level of women's political participation justifies the need

for effective methods to improve women's political participation and decision-making in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings of this study will help policy makers to achieve gender equality in Malaysia. Finally, this study contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-5&16) by pushing policy makers to be fair to all citizens and improve equality.

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### **Conflicts Of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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