Women and Cost of Politics in Malaysia

Towards Inclusive and Affordable Political Participation

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This is an updated version of the report with Abbreviation Page. Apart from these terminological refinements and minor editorial corrections, the substantive findings and analysis of the report remain unchanged. Readers are encouraged to consult and cite this updated version in future references.

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Abbreviation

ADUNs	State Legislators
Beijing Declaration	United Nation's Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)
Bersatu	The Malaysian United Indigenous Party / Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia
Bersih	The Coalition for Clean and Fair Election
CDF	Constituency Development Funds
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CIJ	Centre for Independent Journalism
CLPR	Closed-List Proportional Representation
DAP	Democratic Action Party
Dewan Rakyat	The Lower House of Parliament
DUN	State Legislative Assembly
EC	The Election Commission
FPTP	First-Past-The-Post
IDEAS	The Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MMM	Mixed Member Majoritarian
MPs	Members of Parliament
MUDA	Malaysian United Democratic Alliance / Ikatan Demokratik Malaysia
PAS	The Malaysian Islamic Party / Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
PH	Pakatan Harapan

PKMM	The Malay Nationalist Party / Parti Kebangsaan Malayu Malaya
PKR	People's Justice Party / Parti Keadilan Rakyat
PR	Proportional Representation
PRS	Parti Rakyat Sarawak
PSM	The Socialist Party of Malaysia / Parti Sosialis Malaysia
ROS	Registrar of Societies
UMNO	The United Malays National Organisation
WARISAN	Party Warisan Sabah
WP	Wilayah Persekutuan

For the purposes of this report, references to 'women' should be understood as referring to women political leaders, including Members of Parliament, state legislators, and women actively involved in political parties.

Executive Summary and Key Findings

This report by Project Stability and Accountability for Malaysia (Projek SAMA) investigates the cost of political participation in Malaysia and how it hinders women's entry, retention (or sustainability), and advancement in politics. Despite Malaysia's commitments to gender equality under international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nation's Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)(Beijing Declaration), women's representation in politics remains low throughout the years. The research identifies financial barriers, not just during elections but throughout political careers, as one factor limiting women's political representation.

The study employs a qualitative methodology comprising desk research and in-depth interviews with eight political actors (seven women and one man) from diverse political backgrounds and geographic regions. Interviewees include Members of Parliament (MP), state legislators (ADUN), former parliamentarians, and party central committee. The interviews offer grounded insights into the gendered nature of political financing, with particular attention to how costs and party structures intersect to restrict women's political opportunities.

The following key findings outline the most critical challenges and enablers identified based on the interviews, ranging from structural barriers within the electoral system and political financing to cultural and societal expectations that shape women's opportunities. At the same time, the findings highlight positive factors such as mentorship, male allyship, and capacity-building initiatives that can help pave the way for more equitable representation. Together, these insights provide a clearer picture of the realities women face in Malaysia's political landscape and the reforms needed to foster a more inclusive and sustainable pathway for women in leadership.

Women's Political Careers are Built Over Time with Limited Support

Most women in politics work their way up over years through unpaid (volunteer) or low-paid positions within party structures, incurring significant time, financial, and opportunity costs, without guaranteed career advancement or candidacy.

Financial Barriers in Internal Party Elections Limit Inclusive Leadership

Interviews reveal that candidates contesting internal party elections rely heavily on personal savings to fund their campaigns, ranging from RM10,000 to RM20,000 for just a central committee position. For this, fundraising beyond personal networks remains limited, making financial capacity one of the important decisive factors in securing leadership roles. This reliance on self-funding reinforces structural inequalities, as women, youth, and minority members, who may have fewer financial resources, can be disproportionately disadvantaged in advancing within party hierarchies. The impedingly high political cost suggests an intersectionality problem of women's political marginalisation: the poorer she is, the more marginalised she would be.

Insufficient and Uneven Party Support for Campaign Financing

Election campaigning in Malaysia is financially demanding, with mandatory deposits and extensive logistical costs adding to the burden. While some parties provide limited support for candidate deposits, many rely heavily on candidates to self-finance their own campaigns, and support mechanisms are inconsistent across parties. Although allocations are not explicitly discriminatory by gender, the lack of systematic and adequate party funding leaves most candidates, particularly those without personal wealth or strong donor networks struggling to cover campaign expenses. This reinforces structural inequalities and disproportionately disadvantages women candidates, who often face additional barriers in fundraising.

Lack of Financial Security Threatens Women's Political Sustainability

The financial strain of serving as an elected representative can be so overwhelming that it leaves little room for savings, pushing individuals into constant financial precarity without the security of an emergency cushion. One opposition MP reveals that 60% of her salary goes to constituency and party work, while the remaining 40% is insufficient to cover her household expenses with school-going children, resulting in monthly deficits and no savings for a "rainy day." This lack of financial security not only places immense personal stress on women leaders but also makes their political careers highly vulnerable to unexpected crises. Without savings, many women may find it unsustainable to remain in politics, let alone contest future elections, reinforcing gender disparities in long-term political participation.

Fundraising is Harder for Women Due to Structural and Cultural Bias

In a political environment shaped by winnability calculations, women face greater challenges in fundraising. Persistent stereotypes about leadership suitability and constituency-candidacy fit mean that women are frequently perceived as less viable candidates, making funders more hesitant to invest in their campaigns. As a result, women often need endorsements or backing from senior male leaders to gain credibility with potential donors. This reliance reinforces existing power hierarchies within parties and further limits women's autonomy and visibility in the political arena.

Lack of Institutionalised Funding Mechanisms, Including Public Funding and CDF

The absence of institutionalised and transparent funding structures, such as public funding for political parties and legislated Constituency Development Funds (CDF), creates deep structural inequalities between government and opposition representatives. Without guaranteed access to resources, opposition MPs are often denied or severely underfunded compared to their government counterparts, forcing them to depend on donations or personal savings to serve their constituencies. This lack of structural support not only limits their capacity to provide services and maintain visibility but also entrenches systemic disadvantages in electoral competition, ultimately depriving voters in opposition-held areas of equal access to public resources and weakening democratic accountability. If women's representation is stronger in some opposition parties, the women's percentage may drop in future if these opposition parties lose grounds due to disadvantage in service competition.

Cultural and Regional Stereotypes Hinder Minority Women's Participation

Some interviewees suggest, deeply entrenched gender norms in minority and indigenous communities, such as among the Dayaks and Kadazandusuns, may act as strong barriers to women's political involvement and shape public attitudes towards women's representation.

Lack of Political Financing Regulation Increases Moral Risk

In the absence of a Political Financing Act in Malaysia, some respondents voice deep concern about the association between politics and unethical practices, which creates a moral dilemma for women entering the field. Without clear regulations on campaign financing and fundraising, candidates are often forced to navigate opaque and unregulated funding channels that may involve bribery, slander, or other forms of "dirty politics." For many women, this environment presents an ethical line they are unwilling to cross. Four out of seven women respondents shared that they would rather operate with limited resources and risk losing an election than compromise their integrity.

Insufficient and Ad Hoc Funding for Women's Capacity Building

Women's wings in Malaysian political parties play a vital role in grassroots mobilization and advancing women's participation, yet they remain chronically underfunded. Financial allocations from party headquarters often prioritize parental body and state chapters, leaving women's wings with minimal or no dedicated resources, forcing them to rely on self-initiated fundraising or ad hoc collaborations. While initiatives such as the People's Justice Party (PKR)'s *30% Representative Fund* show promising efforts to build candidate pipelines, these remain limited, short-term, and largely driven by women themselves rather than institutional party support. Without sustainable and dedicated funding structures, the development of women leaders will remain fragmented, undermining long-term progress toward gender parity in political representation.

Male Allyship is Crucial to Advancing Women's Representation

Male allyship is a decisive factor in advancing women's political participation in Malaysia. Many women politicians gained critical experience, visibility, and networks through mentorship roles with senior male leaders, and in several cases, male allies provided direct financial support, such as covering candidate deposits that enabled women to contest elections. Parties with male leaders who actively championed women, like Democratic Action Party (DAP), showed stronger outcomes in women's representation. However, respondents emphasized that meaningful progress cannot rely solely on women's wings or women leaders; sustained male allyship in financing, public endorsement, and even sharing care responsibilities is essential to overcoming entrenched gender stereotypes and structural barriers

In conclusion, the cost of politics in Malaysia is not merely a financial issue. It is a systemic barrier that disproportionately excludes women from political life. Addressing these costs through structural reforms, inclusive policy, and institutional accountability is essential to achieving genuine gender equality in political representation. Without such action, Malaysia will continue to fall short of its national and international commitments to inclusive and participatory democracy.

To address these challenges, this report recommends the following reforms to strengthen women's political participation and representation in Malaysia:

1) **Introduce Closed List Proportional Representation (CLPR) with Gender Quotas**
   Adopt Closed-List Proportional Representation (CLPR) seats alongside First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) to ensure more women candidates, reduce reliance on individual campaign financing, and improve access to funding networks through higher electability.

2) **Enact a Political Finance Act with Public Funding**
   Establish transparent rules on political financing and introduce public funding to reduce dependence on private donors, leveling the playing field for underrepresented groups.

3) **Embed Gender-Responsive Public Funding**
   Dedicate a portion of public funding as incentives for parties that field and elect more women candidates, encouraging gender diversity in leadership.

4) **Legislate Equitable Constituency Development Funds (CDF)**
   Ensure fair distribution of Constituency Development Funds (CDF) to all elected representatives, regardless of party affiliation, to prevent systemic disadvantages against opposition women lawmakers.

5) **Implement Party-Level Quotas and Financial Support**
   Introduce voluntary gender quotas for FPTP candidates and leadership positions, coupled with structured financial support and transparent allocation of campaign resources for women.

6) **Provide Capacity Building and Financial Literacy Training**
   Strengthen women candidates' campaign readiness through training in budgeting, fundraising, and navigating party finance mechanisms

Background, Objectives and Methodology

In Malaysia, women remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership, holding less than 15% of parliamentary seats despite comprising nearly half of the population. This persistent gap exists despite the nation's commitment to gender equality under international frameworks such as the United Nation's Beijing Declaration and Planform for Action (1995), which sets the benchmark of at least 30% representation of women in decision-making positions.

Studies have shown that women's political participation is held back by a combination of structural, cultural, and financial barriers. Women face entrenched gender roles, male-dominated party structures, lack of mentorship, and limited access to resources (Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, 2023). Additional obstacles include the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system, the absence of gender quotas, unequal access to financing, and negative portrayals such as cyberbullying, which frame politics as unsafe for women. Family and caregiving responsibilities further compound these challenges, making it difficult for women to balance political and domestic roles.

Table 1 Percentage of women in national parliaments in Southeast Asia

Rank	Country	Lower or single House				Upper chamber			
		Elections	Seats	Women	% W	Elections	Seats	Women	% W
46	Timor-Leste	5.2023	65	23	35.4				
59	Singapore	5.2025	99	32	32.3				
63	Viet Nam	5.2021	478	150	31.4				
84	Philippines	5.2025	314	89	28.3	5.2025	24	5	20.8
109	Lao PDR	2.2021	164	36	22.0				
110	Indonesia	2.2024	580	127	21.9				
124	Thailand	5.2023	495	97	19.6	6.2024	200	45	22.5
151	Cambodia	7.2023	125	17	13.6	2.2024	62	12	19.4
152	Malaysia	11.2022	222	30	13.5	-	56	9	16.1
158	Brunei Darussalam	1.2023	34	4	11.8				

** The countries are ranked according to the percentage of seats held by women in lower or single parliamentary chambers.*

*** Myanmar is not included in the ranking as there is currently no functioning parliament.*

Malaysia ranked 152th in the world, 2nd last in Southeast Asia based on a ranking compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union as of 1st July 2025. (IPU, 2025)

Another factor that could hinder women's participation in politics is the *financial cost*. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive local research or empirical evidence on how these costs specifically affect women within Malaysia's political landscape.

Drawing from Gordon et al. (2021) which showed that the high financial cost of campaigning is a barrier for many women entering politics, often forcing them to rely on personal savings, reduce work hours, or even withdraw from candidacy due to financial insecurity. While male candidates often benefit from well-established political networks and donor access, women may face gender-specific fundraising challenges, income disparities, and heightened pressure to demonstrate credibility through costly campaigns.

This report seeks to explore how the cost of politics in Malaysia affects women's political participation, focusing on the gendered dynamics of campaign financing and access to funding. It also examines whether and how systemic barriers having an impact on financial constraints contribute to unequal representation.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to understand and address the systemic and financial barriers affecting women's political participation in Malaysia, with the following specific objectives:

1. To collect data and assess the state of women's political representation in Malaysia, and identify whether gendered barriers related to the cost of politics contribute to unequal participation—specifically the challenges women candidates face in campaign fundraising, party and public office expenses, and personal financial commitments
2. To investigate whether women candidates face greater difficulty in fundraising due to gendered biases in donor networks, the need to spend more than male candidates to establish credibility and visibility, and differing financial expectations from political parties, voters, and funders
3. To explore how the presence or absence of relevant legislation, government policies, or party guidelines influence gendered access to political financing
4. To provide evidence-based insights to inform policy reforms and advocacy strategies aimed at ensuring more equitable access to campaign financing and supporting inclusive political participation

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, compiling insights from desk research and in-depth interviews to examine the gendered dimensions of political financing in Malaysia.

The desk research and review of existing literature provide foundational insights into the broader context of women's political representation, campaign financing structures, and gender disparities in political participation.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted between May and June 2025 with seven women and one male politician — the latter serving both as a party treasurer and an elected representative — representing various political parties in Malaysia. The participants included Members of Parliament (MPs), State Legislators (ADUNs), Central Party Committee Members, and former parliamentarians.

They were drawn from seven different states, with selection taking into account rural–urban backgrounds, age, years of experience, ethnicity, and other socio-demographic factors, recognising that such variables may shape their experiences. The interviews primarily targeted individuals who currently hold or have held decision-making roles within their political parties as well as in the policymaking sphere.

It is important to note that this is a sampling of experiences within the political ecosystem of Malaysia as the respondent base is limited and may not reflect the entirety of issues with regards to political financing towards women's participation in Malaysia.

The interviews were conducted via online Zoom for seven of the respondents and one written response due to the limited time frame in which it was conducted and presented.

Seven of the respondents were asked approximately 50 questions over an average of 1 - 1.5 hour interview periods. These were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using an AI tool, Fireflies.ai, and verified, edited and fact-checked by the researchers.

The Political Landscape for Women in Malaysia

Women have played an important but often under-recognized role in Malaysian political development since the country's early post-colonial era. From grassroots activism and social reform movements to national politics, Malaysian women have historically contributed to the shaping of political discourse, yet their formal participation in decision-making structures has remained limited.

Early Involvement and Post-Independence Developments

During the colonial period and leading up to independence in 1957, women were active in anti-colonial movements, labor unions, and welfare organizations. Early women leaders like Shamsiah Fakeh of the leftist Malay Nationalist Party (PKMM) and Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim of The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)'s women's wing made significant contributions to political organizing and advocacy. However, these early efforts did not immediately translate into proportional political representation.

Following independence, women's political involvement was primarily channeled through party-affiliated women's wings, such as Wanita UMNO, Wanita Malaysia Chinese Association (MCA), and Wanita Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC). These platforms gave women a formal space in party structures, but often relegated them to auxiliary roles with limited influence over central party leadership or policymaking. While some prominent women rose through party ranks, such as Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, who became a senior minister, women remained underrepresented in Parliament and Cabinet positions for decades.

The 1980s and 1990s saw increasing calls for gender equality in governance, partly driven by Malaysia's engagement with global human rights and development discourses. The state's ratification of CEDAW in 1995 marked a turning point for Malaysia in addressing structural and systemic gender inequalities. As a signatory, Malaysia has a commitment to Article 7 of the Convention on ensuring equal participation in public life and decision-making including in political participation.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Article 7: States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right: (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;

(b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;

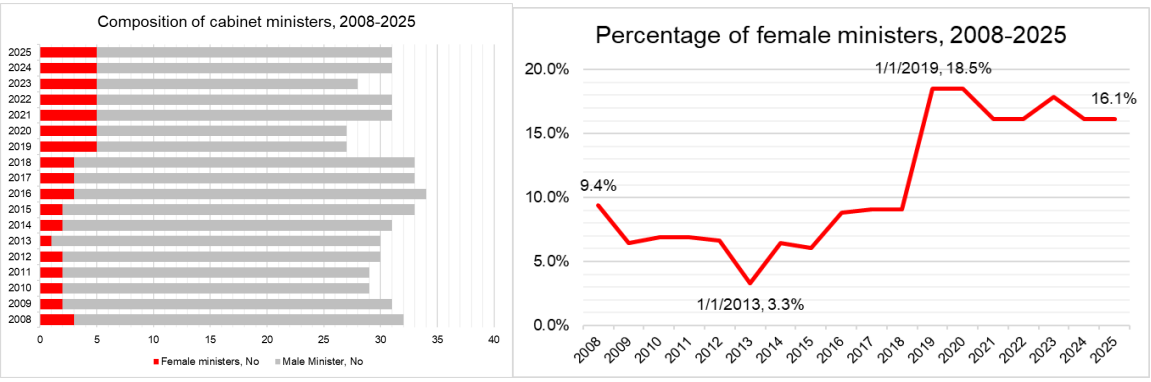
(c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country

Key Milestones and Missed Opportunities

Several milestones over the past few decades highlight both the potential and the persistent challenges facing women in Malaysian politics. The appointment of Rafidah Aziz as Minister of International Trade and Industry (1987–2008) and Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as Malaysia's first female Deputy Prime Minister (2018–2020) were landmark moments. These figures demonstrated that women can hold high office and wield significant influence within Malaysia's male-dominated political landscape.

The 2008 and 2013 general elections saw a modest increase in women candidates and elected representatives, largely due to growing advocacy from civil society, increased media attention, and shifting party strategies. However, these gains were not sustained across all states or parties. While certain opposition parties, such as DAP and PKR, began fielding more female candidates, major ruling parties lagged in adopting gender quotas or prioritizing women's political leadership.

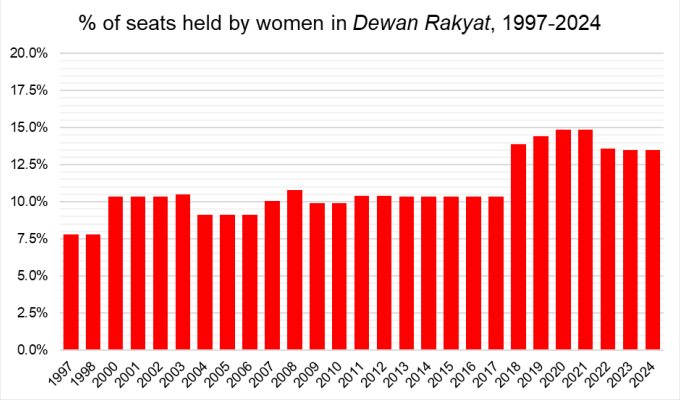
Figure 1 Number and Percentage of Women Ministers in the Cabinet, 2008-2025



Sources: Maha Balakrishnan (2023, Table 1). Data for year 2024 and 2025 is collated from news reports by the authors.

The percentage of women in cabinet rose significantly after the democratic transition in May 2018. Compared to a low 3.3% in 2013, it reached the height of 18.5% in the first post-transition government under Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020) and stays above 15% since. (Figure 1) While this is still significantly lower than the minimum 30% benchmark, this under-achievement stems from the low percentage of women parliamentarians, which in turn stems from the low percentage of women parliamentary candidates. In 2018, the percentage of women parliamentary candidates fielded by the major parties varied from 6.3% (Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)) and 7.4% (UMNO) to 17.4% (DAP) and 18.4% (PKR). Interestingly, women candidates overtook men candidates in the rate of getting elected by a substantive margin in several major parties, by 23.8% for UMNO (female's 66.7% as compared to male's 42.9%), 17.3% for PKR, 13.2% for DAP and 10.9% for Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu). Why? While women were given a much smaller number of seats to contest, many of those seats were safe seats and many of those women candidates were also popular. In total, only 32 women won seats in the 222-member Dewan Rakyat (the Lower House of Parliament) in 2018, constituting a pathetic 14.4% share. In 2022, the number even dropped slightly to only 30 (13.5%) (Figure 2) falling significantly short of the international minimum 30% benchmark. (Yeong, 2018; Maha Balakrishnan, 2023)

Figure 2 Percentage of seats held by women in *Dewan Rakyat*, 1997-2024



Source: World Bank (2025).

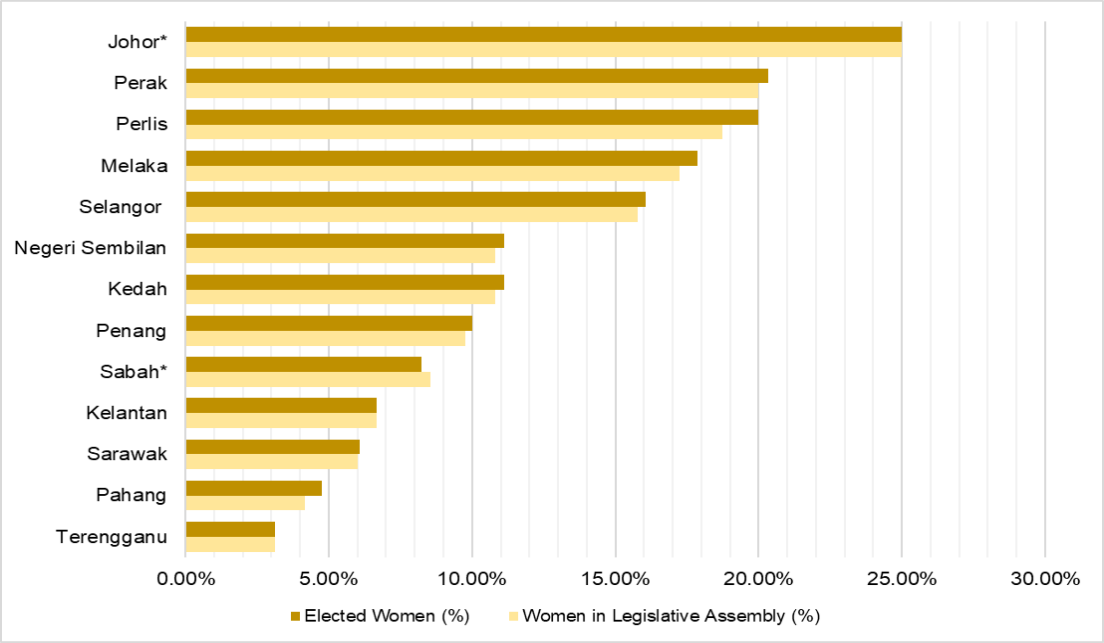
At the state level, representation is even more uneven. In 2018, when state elections were held in 12 states except Sarawak, women won only 62 out of 505 seats, constituting 12.7%. (Yeong, 2018, Table 17). As of December 2022, only 73 (12.17%) out of the 600 elected ADUNs in all 13 states were women. Subsequently, two by-elections following the passing of female lawmakers returned male successors. The actual percentage of women lawmakers is actually lower if we take into account non-elected speakers in all but three states and appointed lawmakers in Sabah and Pahang. As of August 2025, the national percentage stands at only 11.52% and varies significantly by state — from as low as 3.13% in Terengganu to 25.00% in Johor (Table 2). This persistently low level of female representation at the subnational level further highlights the urgent needs of a national framework or enforcement mechanism to ensure consistent progress across political and geographic lines.

Table 2 Percentage of Women amongst Elected and Appointed Members of State Legislative Assembly (DUN) across the 13 States (as of 1.8.2025)

States	Elected Members	Women (No)	Women (%)	Appointed Members	Non-elected Speaker and Deputies	Women (No)	Women (%)	Total Seats	Women (No)	Women (%)
Johor*	56	14	25.00%	0	0	0	NA	56	14	25.00%
Kedah	36	4	11.11%	0	1	0	0.00%	37	4	10.81%
Kelantan	45	3	6.67%	0	0	0	NA	45	3	6.67%
Melaka	28	5	17.86%	0	1	0	0.00%	29	5	17.24%
Negeri Sembilan	36	4	11.11%	0	1	0	0.00%	37	4	10.81%
Pahang	42	2	4.76%	5	1	0	0.00%	48	2	4.17%
Penang	40	4	10.00%	0	1	0	0.00%	41	4	9.76%
Perak	59	12	20.34%	0	1	0	0.00%	60	12	20.00%
Perlis	15	3	20.00%	0	1	0	0.00%	16	3	18.75%
Selangor	56	9	16.07%	0	1	0	0.00%	57	9	15.79%
Terengganu	32	1	3.13%	0	0	0	NA	32	1	3.13%
Sabah*	73	6	8.22%	6	3	1	11.11%	82	7	8.54%
Sarawak	82	5	6.10%	0	1	0	0.00%	83	5	6.02%
Total	600	72	12.00%	11	12	1	4.35%	623	73	11.72%

*one less woman ADUN after by-election.

Figure 3 Percentage of Women amongst Elected and Appointed Members of State Legislative Assembly (DUN) across the 13 States (as of 1.8.2025)



First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) as Barrier to Participation and Leadership

Reports published by the International IDEA (Reynolds et al., 2008, p. 61; Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024, pp. 51 - 53) notes that proportional representation (PR) generally results in a significantly higher percentage of women elected compared to the FPTP system. This is because the PR system allows political parties to present candidate lists and use gender quotas more effectively. In the 2022 global elections, countries that adopted PR systems or mixed electoral systems elected an average of 29% women, compared to only 22.4% in countries using majority or plurality systems such as FPTP. (Ridley-Castle, 2023)

Under the FPTP, in which each constituency elects only one representative based on plurality vote (the most votes, not necessarily to reach the majority), creates a pressure for political parties, or coalitions, to nominate the most winnable candidate. Thus, the selection is typically driven by strategic calculation around constituency demographics, candidate characteristics, voter loyalty and political alliances - in other words, constituencies and candidates need to match to some extent.

In these complex calculations, women are often overlooked for candidacy, even when they are qualified and have built experience on the ground, if party leadership deems them “not a good match” for the constituency. This can be due to gender—especially in seats long held by male incumbents—or for other reasons such as local origin, ethnicity or sub-ethnicity, religion, or personal style. Fielding women in such constituencies is frequently perceived as a political risk. A rare exception is Batu Kawan, where Ms. Kasthuri Patto succeeded incumbent Prof. Ramasamy Palanisamy and successfully retained the seat in the 13th General Election in 2013. The question remains: how many such rare cases will occur where women are given the chance to contest and

win in male-held constituencies? And more importantly, when will enough women be nominated to reach the 30% target for women's representation—for example, in the Penang State Assembly, where it currently stands at just 10% (4 out of 40)?

In multiethnic Malaysia, FPTP results in permanent coalitions that consist of several parties with different social bases to pool votes. This however limits the number of seats a component party can contest and allows party leadership to control candidacy selection. When candidacy selection is opaque and often used as a means of patronage in factionalism, capable women without the right connection might easily be passed over.

Hence, we must recognise that the ultimate obstacle to higher women's representation is the lack of male retirees, not of female talents. When the electoral system cannot ensure that new female candidates would replace the weakest male incumbents, the stronger male incumbents often block the rise of female new bloods for the fear that they would be replaced next. This underlines the inherent weakness of FPTP for the implementation of gender quota.

In contrast, a "Closed-List Proportional Representation" (CLPR) system, where gender quotas can be applied through placement rules. In CLPR, "winnable seats" for women can be secured by placing them in higher, pre-determined positions on the party list—such as 1st, 3rd, or 5th—without the added hurdle of fitting them to a specific constituency profile. This means women only compete among themselves for these winnable list positions, making it easier to guarantee representation.

Current Status and Emerging Trends

While progress remains slow, there are emerging signs of change. The 2022 general election saw several young women and first-time female candidates elected to Parliament, reflecting a growing demand for diverse and inclusive political leadership. Civil society organizations, women's rights groups, and academic institutions have played a key role in advocating for gender-inclusive policies, conducting leadership training, and supporting new candidates.

Political parties have also begun to respond, albeit inconsistently. Announced at their 2025 General Assembly, DAP reaffirmed its commitment to gender equality by pledging to field at least 30% women candidates in future elections as part of its effort to increase female political representation. (DAP, 2025) Another party that is consistently pushing for 30% representation for women is PKR.

That notwithstanding, the absence of binding party quotas or enforcement mechanisms continues to limit meaningful change. The pledges simply did not translate into electoral outcomes. The history of women in Malaysian politics is one of resilience and gradual advancement in the face of systemic challenges. While women have made important inroads, they continue to confront institutional, cultural, and financial barriers that limit their political participation and leadership. Bridging this gap requires targeted reforms, sustained advocacy, and a collective political will to build an inclusive and representative democracy. Understanding the historical trajectory and current status of women's representation is crucial to informing effective interventions, particularly in addressing the financial inequalities that shape who can run for office and who ultimately gets elected.

The Role of Finance in Political Participation

Political financing is essential for politicians to contest elections and sustain their roles as elected representatives.

However, Malaysia currently lacks a comprehensive political finance law, leaving political parties and candidates largely unregulated in how they receive and spend money. Existing provisions are fragmented across multiple laws, including the *Election Offences Act 1954*, the *Societies Act 1966*, and the *Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009*, none of which adequately address the full scope of political finance. For example, while the *Election Offences Act* sets a spending cap for individual candidates during official campaign periods (RM200,000 for a parliamentary candidate and RM100,000 for a state candidate), it does not limit political party spending, nor does it require disclosure of donors or regulate contributions from private or foreign entities.

Act	Section
Federal Constitution	*Article 48(2):-* *"Federal law may impose, for such periods as may be specified thereby, disqualified for membership of either House of Parliament on persons committing offence in connection with elections; and any person who has been convicted of such an offence or has in proceedings relating to an election been proved guilty of an act constituting such an offence, shall be disqualified accordingly for a period so specified"*
Election Offences Act 1954	*Section 19(1):-* *"No candidate at an election shall, whether acting in person or by his election agent, incur or authorize expenses in excess of two hundred thousand ringgit in the case of a candidate for election to the Dewan Rakyat or one hundred thousand ringgit in the case of a candidate for election to a Legislative Assembly."*
	Section 23(1): - *"Every candidate at an election and his election agent shall, within thirty-one days after the date of publication of the result of the election in the Gazette, lodge with the State Election Officer a true return, in the prescribed form, containing detailed statements of all expenses incurred by such candidate and his election agent at or in respect of such election."*
	Section 23(7): - *"If any candidate or election agent fails to comply with the requirements of this section, he shall be guilty of an illegal practice and shall be liable, on conviction, to a fine not exceeding five thousand ringgit."*

Societies Act 1966	Section 14(1):- *Every registered society shall, within sixty days after the holding of its annual general meeting or if no annual general meeting is held, within sixty days after the end of each calender year, forward to the Registrar -* *(d) the accounts of the last financial year of the society together with a balance sheet showing the financial position at the close of the last financial year of the society* *(db) the description of any money or property, any pecuniary benefit or advantage received by the society from any person ordinarily resident outside Malaysia or any organization, authority, government, or agency of any government, outside Malaysia; and* *(e) such other information as the Registrar may from time to time require*
	Section 14(2):- *The Registrar may, at any time by notice under his hand, order any registered society to furnish him in writing with -* *(d) duly audited accounts;* (db) *the description of any money or property, any pecuniary benefit or advantage received by the society from any person ordinarily resident outside Malaysia or any organization, authority, government, or agency of any government, outside Malaysia; an* *(e) such other information as the Registrar may from time to time require*
	Section 14(4):- *For the purpose of this section, "duly audited" means audited by an auditor approved by the Registrar, who may give such approval generally or for any particular audit; and the auditor so approved shall make a report on the accounts examined by him in such form as the Registrar may require*
	Section 14(5):- *Where the particulars required to be furnished under subsection (2) are not furnished within the time stated in the order, or any extension of the time allowed by the Registrar, the Registrar may make a provisional order for the dissolution of the society.*
	Section 15 (1): - *The obligations imposed upon registered societies by Section 14 shall be binding upon every office-bearer and upon every preson managing or assisting in the management of any such society in Malaysia:* *Provided always that any such officer-bearer or other person shall not be so bound unless he has been served with the order given by the Registrar*

Under the Societies Act 1966, political parties (as registered societies) are required to submit annual returns, including audited financial statements, to the Registrar of Societies (ROS). However, in practice, enforcement is weak and inconsistent. While the law provides for penalties, including fines, suspension, or deregistration of societies that fail to comply, political parties are rarely sanctioned for non-compliance. Most submissions remain internal documents to ROS, not disclosed publicly, leaving room for selective or sparing enforcement.

This legal vacuum has allowed for unchecked flows of political donations, patronage, and even high-profile corruption scandals, such as the 1MDB case. Without binding legislation on political funding, Malaysia's electoral system remains vulnerable to money politics, unequal competition, and low public trust, highlighting the urgent need for political finance reform (Tan & Ooi, 2021).

Income and Expenses

In Malaysia, political parties raise funds through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms, many of which operate with minimal transparency due to the absence of comprehensive political financing laws. According to Tan & Ooi (2021), parties primarily rely on mandatory contributions from their elected representatives, membership fees, public donations collected during events (such as fundraising dinners and ceramahs), and private donations from undisclosed individuals or business entities. Additionally, some parties generate income from party-owned businesses and properties—UMNO and MCA, for example, have significant stakes in media companies and real estate assets. However, these income streams are often unstable, especially for opposition and smaller parties, which have fewer elected officials to contribute. The lack of regulations means there are no caps on donations or requirements to disclose donor identities, allowing room for anonymous contributions and shadowy funding sources that can perpetuate corruption and political patronage.

Tan & Ooi (2021) also outlines the broad and often unregulated spectrum of political expenses in Malaysia. Political parties and candidates incur significant costs not only during election campaigns but also in maintaining daily operations. For parties, regular expenses include staff salaries, office rentals, utilities, outreach programs, party congresses, and internal elections, which can cost millions, especially for large national parties like PKR. Smaller parties such as the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) operate on tighter budgets but still face essential costs for administration and outreach.

Election-related expenses are particularly high. Candidates must fund campaign materials, advertising, event logistics, transportation, and payments to polling and counting agents. Many candidates receive little to no financial support from their parties and rely on personal savings, loans, or donations to cover campaign costs—sometimes exceeding the legal spending limits set by the *Election Offences Act 1954*. These limits (RM100,000 for state and RM200,000 for parliamentary seats) are widely regarded as outdated because they no longer reflect the real costs of modern election campaigns. When the law was introduced, campaigns were modest and low-cost, relying mainly on posters, banners, and small rallies. Today, candidates must cover social media advertising, large-scale *ceramah*, constituency-wide logistics, paid staff, and payments to polling/counting agents. After decades of inflation, these legal caps are unrealistically low.

In practice, the limits can be bypassed. As the Election Offence Act only monitors candidate expenditure and not party-level or third-party spending, these practices go largely unchecked. The Coalition for Clean and Fair Election (Bersih)'s GE-14 Observation Report (Bersih 2.0 et al., 2018) noted numerous instances of campaign spending that far exceeded the legal limits, with much of it unreported, indicating that these expenditures may have been borne by third parties.

For GE15 (2022), Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) released an observation report (Masjaliza Hamzah et al., 2023) noting unprecedented spending on digital advertising. Meta's ad transparency data showed political parties and candidates purchasing millions of ringgit worth of ads, far more than could be declared under individual caps.

This loophole creates an uneven playing field: wealthier parties and incumbents can vastly outspend rivals through indirect channels, while enforcement remains weak due to gaps in the law and limited oversight capacity.

Additionally, elected representatives are expected to maintain constituency service centres, which come with monthly operational costs, including staff salaries and community programs. In some cases, the cost of running service centres are provided alongside the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), but this allocation is uneven and often politicized. Beyond formal expenses, Tan & Ooi (2001) also highlights hidden or "shadow" costs such as vote-buying and payments to cybertroopers for online propaganda. These activities are difficult to track but play a growing role in Malaysian politics.

These layers of expenses illustrate the high cost of political participation and the urgent need for reform in Malaysia's political financing landscape.

Private and Public Funding for Women Candidates

A United Nations Development Program primer (Sidhu & Meena, 2007) encapsulate this issue well. It highlights that despite formal commitments to equality, such as CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration, access to political power is often dictated by access to money. Thus, addressing the gender gap in electoral financing is critical to advancing women's political participation.

There are two types of funding for political activities : public and private. In Malaysia, there is no public funding for political parties, let alone gender-sensitive allocation mechanisms or enforcement. On the other hand, private financing can fill gaps but tends to benefit wealthier, well-connected candidates and can increase corruption risks.

Women often face difficulties accessing private funds due to their limited presence in political leadership roles, weaker networks with donors, and the persistent bias within party structures that favors male candidates in resource allocation (Tan & Ooi (2021)). Many political parties do not provide equal funding or logistical support to women candidates, viewing them as less likely to win or prioritizing male incumbents. As a result, women are frequently forced to self-finance their campaigns, rely on personal savings, or turn to family and community-level fundraising—methods that rarely match the resources available to their male counterparts (Gordon et al., 2021). This financial inequality is even more pronounced for women contesting in rural or less-developed constituencies, where campaign costs are higher due to travel and infrastructure challenges (Tan & Ooi, 2021).

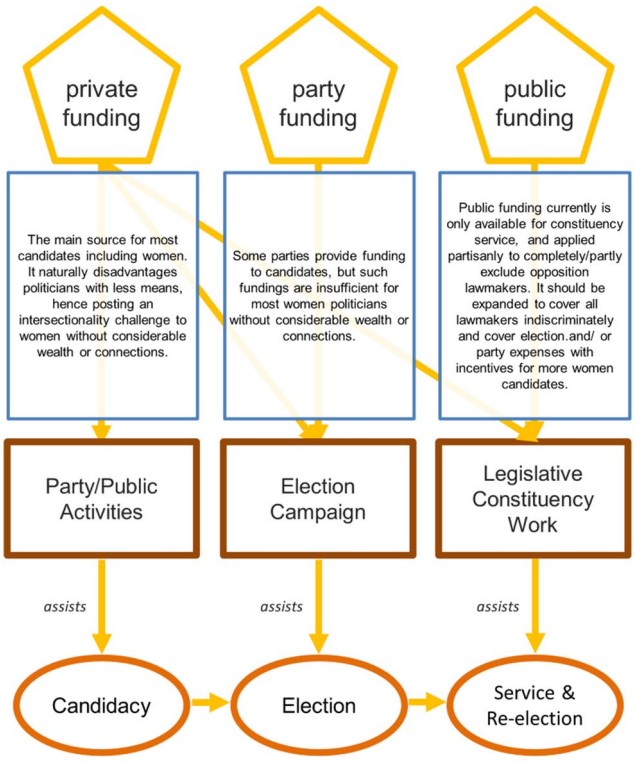
On the other hand, public funding of political parties reduce reliance on wealthy donors, curb corruption, and create a fairer playing field for smaller parties, women, and minority candidates. It

encourages transparency through stricter reporting, eases the financial burden of campaigning, and brings Malaysia in line with international democratic practices. The Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) strongly advocates for a future political financing law to include 0.05% of the national budget allocated as public funding for political parties, distributed to parties that secure at least one seat or 2% of total valid votes. (IDEAS, 2023) This will reduce reliance on private funds and promote a fairer electoral landscape.

In addition, public funding can be designed to include targeted subsidies that promote women's political representation, such as allocating additional funds to parties that achieve specific benchmarks in women's candidacy or representation, thereby serving as an incentive for greater gender inclusivity.

Unfortunately, In the absence of a public funding law, Malaysia political parties rely heavily on private donations and opaque financing, creating risks of corruption while disadvantageous to smaller parties, women, and minority candidates.

Figure 4 Infographic on how public funding works



Financial Barriers to Women's Political Participation

This chapter outlines some notable barriers to women's political participation from both data and information available from published sources and lived experience shared by women politicians and party leaders across the political spectrum, first-hand through in-depth interviews.

This research conducted 8 in-depth interviews across political parties. The interviews primarily focused on understanding the experiences of persons in the political arena making it a largely qualitative survey. Questions sought to understand their experiences with a focus on four main areas, these being:

a. General background (including family exposure) and purpose as well as pathway to joining politics in Malaysia.
b. Experiences and exposure with party structure, internal election mechanisms and expenditure
c. Needs and cost of running an election campaign, as well as running service centres/mobilising of grassroots and serving as an elected representative
d. Individual experiences with political financing disparities, gender biases, stereotypes and discrimination
e. Recommendations or suggestions to address challenges faced in increasing women's political participation and propose policies to encourage women to join politics.
f. Through these questions, the survey also assessed political investments towards increased women's participation, general political expenditure and the role of gender in every step of the process - taking into consideration the unique needs of women and men in the political arena.

The research explores six key aspects related to women's political participation in Malaysia. The first aspect looks at the overall levels of women's involvement in politics. The second examines culturally entrenched gender stereotypes within indigenous communities. The third aspect focuses on factors influencing women's interest in, and perceived suitability for, contesting elections. The fourth on the candidate selection processes within political parties and how these affect women's chances of being nominated. The fifth considers the financial costs associated with running an election campaign, including fundraising challenges and explores the ongoing expenses tied to holding public office, such as maintaining visibility and supporting constituents. The sixth aspect reviews the availability and nature of specific support mechanisms or programmes aimed at promoting women's political involvement and increasing their presence in decision-making roles.

Women's Participation in Politics: Navigating the Path

The interviews started by asking the respondents their motivations for entering politics. It revealed that all respondents, regardless of gender, were initially drawn to politics by a strong sense of purpose and commitment to a greater cause. For many, their political aspirations were shaped by involvement in student movements and the camaraderie built through activism. Among those interviewed, five out of eight traced their political motivation to these formative experiences, while only two who came from politically active families entered the field knowing the complete picture of the financial costs and personal sacrifices involved in pursuing a political path.

For most of them, their career path into politics is long, uncertain, and financially strenuous, with significant time and opportunity costs. Most respondents did not enter politics through sudden candidacy or direct nomination. Instead, they spent years working their way up within party structures, often beginning as salaried staff, such as special officers, campaign managers, or coordinators or as unpaid volunteers. These roles demand long hours, intense dedication, and frequent travel, yet offer limited financial security or upward mobility unless one becomes an elected representative.

For women, this career path is even more challenging. Many take on these roles while also managing household responsibilities, caregiving duties, and societal expectations about their gender roles. Volunteerism, which forms the backbone of party operations at the state, branch, and district levels, often becomes the primary avenue for women's participation, despite offering no clear pathway to candidacy or leadership. Over half of the respondents observed that while women are highly active in political parties, many of them often prefer back-end roles like campaigning and fundraising rather than frontline leadership positions. Respondents noted challenges in encouraging women to take on public-facing roles, citing barriers such as societal perceptions, traditional gender expectations, the need for family approval, and limited funding to support the development of women leaders.

This results in a significant time cost, as their political engagement does not translate into career progression or financial benefit.

Moreover, women are often not equipped with the necessary political financing literacy at the outset. Those without family backgrounds in politics reported entering the field without a clear understanding of the fundraising and expenditure demands of campaigns. They were unfamiliar with building donor networks or managing campaign budgets, often relying on central party leadership to allocate resources. Over time, women who do make it into elected or public-facing roles must learn these skills rapidly and independently. The research shows that many have become adept at creatively sourcing funds and managing lean campaigns - a testament to their adaptability - but this also reflects the deep inequalities in access to resources.

Women in politics face compounded barriers due to caregiving responsibilities. Without adequate family support or gender-responsive party policies like childcare provision, many women struggle to balance political work with traditional domestic roles. More than half acknowledged care duties being an additional commitment especially for those who volunteer their time to the parties. While

some benefited from financially supportive spouses, many women have had to invest their early years in unpaid or low-paid party roles, sacrificing financial stability and career growth in other sectors to pursue a path in politics.

> *"I realized that there are some people who are single mothers who have children, who might not be able to be involved for the whole process because **women are expected to be home by a certain time to take care of the kids.** And even if your family is supportive of your career, they still expect you to do your duty as a mother and as a wife…. And we look at, for example, of women who had to go through miscarriage during the election campaign, or one, who couldn't attend her own voting day because she had to give birth. And all these other things can play a huge role." [ADUN from Johor]*

Ultimately, the political career path for women is shaped by years of service in low-paid or unpaid roles, substantial time and family sacrifices, and limited institutional support. This path is navigated more as a labour of commitment to social justice and movement building, rather than as a structured or sustainable career trajectory. Without targeted support, reforms in party financing, and gender-responsive policies—such as childcare provision and campaign financing training—women's access to political leadership will continue to be limited by the very path they must take to get there.

The Financial Hurdles and Fundraising Barriers Facing Women in Politics

Volunteerism and party politics

Volunteerism in politics, often celebrated as a selfless act of civic duty, comes with significant hidden costs that disproportionately affect those from marginalized backgrounds, particularly women, youth, and lower-income individuals. While many enter political spaces with a desire to serve the public or support democratic values, the reality is that political volunteerism often demands substantial financial, emotional, and social sacrifices. Volunteers frequently shoulder out-of-pocket expenses such as transport, meals, phone bills, and attire. These costs are rarely reimbursed, and the time spent on political work often comes at the expense of paid employment, caregiving duties, or educational opportunities.

For many, especially women, there is also a significant social cost. Cultural expectations may deem political engagement inappropriate, and public involvement can expose volunteers to reputational risks, personal attacks, or surveillance.

Despite these challenges, volunteers remain the backbone of political movements. However, to ensure that political participation is genuinely inclusive and sustainable, parties, civil society, and donors must recognize the real costs of volunteerism and invest in systems that provide compensation, capacity-building, and long-term support. Without such structural reforms, volunteerism risks becoming a barrier rather than a pathway to equitable political representation.

Volunteerism is often the pathway an aspiring politician must take to gain visibility, build influence, and establish networks within the party in order to rise through the ranks. This journey is typically long, demanding, and financially burdensome. However, one often overlooked and yet financially demanding stage comes during internal party elections. Contesting for positions such as branch, division, or national leadership roles involves extensive campaigning, including travel, organizing dinners or gatherings, and printing promotional materials. These campaigns are almost always self-funded. In the interview, one respondent mentioned that he has spent expenses ranging from RM10,000 to RM20,000 for just a central committee position, sometimes sharing such costs among allies. This creates a significant barrier for those without financial backing and often sidelines individuals, such as women, young people, and minorities who may have the passion and ability but lack the resources. In effect, money can become a gatekeeper to internal party power. As a result, the political pipeline becomes skewed in favor of the wealthy and well-connected, rather than the most competent or committed individuals. For genuine democratic representation to flourish, political parties must reform internal election processes.

> *"I think it's difficult to, **apart from friends and angels**, to raise funds (for internal party elections). So I think **most expenses come from our own pocket.** But I think quite blessingly that it's more meeting people, the campaign and organizing some side small events. So it's not very costly after all. I remember probably to the tune of RM10-20k is enough for me alone. And because central committee members, we all pair up and sometimes we work together collectively. So we share the cause as well." [Party Committee Member of Wilayah Persekutuan (WP)]*

Election campaigns

Election campaigning in Malaysia involves substantial financial costs for expenses such as for logistics, transportation, advertising, venue rentals, materials for outreach, and payments for campaign staff or volunteers.

Additionally, candidates contesting elections must pay a deposit of RM10,000 for a parliamentary seat and RM5,000 for a state seat, along with an additional cleaning deposit of RM5,000 or RM3,000 respectively for campaign material removal. These deposits are forfeited if the candidate fails to secure at least 12.5% of the votes, and the cleaning deposit is only refunded if campaign materials are properly removed. While these are mandatory costs set by the Election Commission (EC), they form just part of the broader financial burden of campaigning, which can be a significant barrier for candidates.

Insufficient party allocation

However, the findings reveal that party allocation for election campaign expenses, particularly candidate deposits, is inconsistent and varies across political parties. While some parties like PKR, Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), and PAS (at the federal level) provide direct support for candidate deposits (amount varies), others such as BERSATU, Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), and UMNO either rely on personal financing or lack clear mechanisms for financial assistance. In parties like DAP and Party Warisan Sabah (WARISAN), support appears to be decided on a case-by-case basis, with no uniform policy in place.

When asked whether such party allocations are discriminatory, most respondents across political parties indicated that there are no barriers that explicitly restrict allocations based on gender.

> *"Depends on the state.* ***But from central, we would (maintain) the allocation as the same.*** *It's the same for every candidate. No gender bias for that. As long as you are the candidate, then we will give the same, but it's not much. And then at the state level, if the state is like what you call it, a strong state, they will get more." [Party Committee member in Wilayah Persekutuan(WP)].*

In many cases, party allocation is not sufficient to run a full scale election campaign. Candidates are expected to fund their own campaigns.

Holding an elected office

Once elected, maintaining an elected office involves significant ongoing costs such as staffing, constituency service, event organisation, community aid, and operational expenses.

They often rely on two sources of funds to sustain their elected office : salary and CDF. CDF is allocated by the federal or state government aimed at supporting community projects, infrastructure, and welfare initiatives for a constituency.

Constituency Development Funds (CDF)

However, in the absence of legislation governing its distribution, the allocation process remains highly politicised and structurally biased - opposition representatives are either denied CDF outright or given a much smaller amount than their government counterparts. This unequal access to funds hinders opposition representatives from adequately serving their constituencies, reducing their visibility and effectiveness, and weakening their chances of re-election. Beyond disadvantagering individual politicians, the politicisation of CDF undermines democratic competition and deprives voters in opposition-held areas of equal access to public resources.

From the interviews, we note that an MP from the ruling coalition received RM1.5million CDF per year, an ADUN from Perak received RM10,000 a month as financial support (regardless of whether the ADUN is from ruling government or opposition), an opposition MP from Melaka received no CDF or financial support at all, and an ADUN from Johor receive financial support of RM200,000 a year (of which RM100,000 is held by district office for small projects).

Syed Saddiq, the MP for Muar and co-founder of MUDA, consistently highlights the challenges of serving his constituency without access to CDF. As an opposition MP, he is excluded from federal allocations typically granted to government-aligned representatives, placing him at a significant disadvantage when it comes to meeting local needs and maintaining a functional service centre. Despite being elected by the people, the denial of CDF forces him to rely on public fundraising, donations, and personal resources to carry out constituency work. This situation not only hampers his ability to deliver services but also exposes the politicisation of public funds meant for constituents, regardless of political affiliation. His experience illustrates the broader structural inequities in Malaysia's political financing system, where access to essential resources is contingent on party alignment rather than democratic mandate.

Salary

All elected representatives draw salaries.

MPs receive around RM23,000 to RM25,700 per month, with variations depending on allowances and location. ADUNs earn between RM14,000 and RM18,200, while those who held dual roles (e.g., former ADUNs/assistant ministers in Sabah) reported earnings of up to RM35,000.

The interviews found that these salaries are often used for, first, deduction ranging from 15%-20% to contribute to the political party, second, a significant portion to be used for running of service centres especially opposition MPs or ADUNs with no or limited access to state-allocated CDF or other state fundings. Several respondents noted that they had to supplement political work with personal funds, indicating that salaries were insufficient once political costs were accounted for.

> *"And yeah, when I was. So I'll just share both my salary and also my, the funds that I received from the government, the peruntukan (allocation). So when **I first started the salary was RM13,200 and then last year our salary was adjusted to RM18,200 per year** and then every year, we, in Johor and I think Johor is one of the states that give allocation to both government and opposition. A lot of other states don't. **And so as opposition I received RM200,000 per year in terms of constituency allocations that RM 200,000** - RM 100,000 is actually kept in the district office account for small projects. So we can only tap into that RM100,000 if we want to execute small projects in our constituency which also means that we don't have a say on what contractor can execute what project." [ADUN from Johor]*

Table 4 Breakdown of Respondents' Salaries and Other resources

Respondent	State/Party	Salary with allowance	Notes
MP	Selangor	RM23000	CDF per year RM1.5 million
MP	Melaka	RM23000	RM13800 (60%) to run constituency office NO CDF
ADUN	Perak	RM14000	Perak state government provide both government and opposition ADUNs financial support for service centres - it is RM10000 per month
ADUN	Johor	RM18200	Both opposition and government ADUN receives RM200000 a year. RM100 000 kept with the district office account for small projects.
Former ADUN / Asst Minister (2018)	Sabah	RM30000 - RM35000 (for both roles)	
MP	Sarawak	RM20000 - RM25700	
Committee Member	Wilayah Persekutuan	Not relevant - voluntary basis	
Former MP	Penang	RM25700 as average salary	(2018) RM300000/year from government to run the office

Note : These figures reflect the information available at the time of the interviews and are based on the recollections of the interviewees.

Fundraising barriers for women

In any case, women must engage in continuous fundraising to sustain their political careers, whether at the early stages within the party, during election campaigns, or while maintaining their roles in elected office.

All of the eight respondents shared that they did not receive sufficient financial support and largely relied on personal savings, donations from the general public and family/friends support to sustain their political career and adequately serve their constituencies. Two respondents shared that being in government did not mean that they received funding for party work.

> *"**So we do have fundraising on our own as well**. Sometimes we do charity events and we raise funds through that. We do fundraising dinners. But you know, it's difficult when you are in government and people don't understand that the finances are different. Government money is not party money. Neither is party money government money. As an MP when I got my allocation, I would say my official allocation for constituency development funds (CDF) which is when PH became government." [Former MP from Penang]*

The interviews have identified the following fundraising barriers for women.

Visibility and Winnability

Lack of visibility limits women politicians' access to donors and makes fundraising difficult.

Based on their responses, four out of seven women respondents shared that women who are visible on the ground, build trust and networks and do not shy away from public-facing roles often result in further participation. This, however, creates a vicious cycle—women are given fewer leadership roles due to a perceived lack of visibility, yet they struggle to become visible without first being entrusted with significant responsibilities.

There is also an internalised expectation for women to go above and beyond to prove their capability and calibre, unlike their male counterparts who may more easily be assumed competent or leadership-ready.

> *"I think it's like this, very simple. If there are 10 criterias for a person to be a candidate, generally speaking, if a man fulfills two out of the 10, he will say, I'm ready to be a candidate. But **the woman who fills up to 8 out of 10 will still say, "I have two more not filled.**" [Former MP from Penang]*

In reality, donors often base their support on perceived winnability, public recognition, and influence within the party or constituency. When women are not given high-profile roles or media coverage, they struggle to build a strong public persona that signals credibility and competitiveness. This makes it harder for potential funders to view them as viable candidates worth investing in.

One respondent explained how it is much more difficult to pitch for donations for women candidates. The quote below strikes at the heart of the issue where she said *"in comparison to pitching for a man, i had to do a lot more explaination..on how they can win a particular seat in comparison to their male counterparts"*.

> *"I personally have fundraised quite substantially specifically for the female candidates because it is a lot tougher for them to access funds than their male counterparts….But* ***when I'm pitching a woman in comparison to pitching a man, I had to do a lot more explanations on what the women candidates have done, on what policies will they want to fight for, on how can they win a particular seat in comparison*** *to their male counterparts. I think people already have that biased view that oh, it's more believable for a man to win than for a woman. So I remember* ***fundraising for a young woman, for example, was 10 times tougher than fundraising for a man****, who was another candidate at that point of time when , for us, the woman candidate was put in a better position and a better seat than the man at that point of time." [ADUN from Johor]*

If perceived winnability is the key to receiving private donations, then the FPTP electoral system becomes the underlying hurdle. As explained earlier, it systematically and structurally disadvantages a woman from being nominated as candidate as opposed to male incumbent.

The issue is amplified when the candidate selection process within political parties is often opaque, lacking clear criteria or transparency, which disadvantages many aspiring candidates. Decisions are typically made behind closed doors by a small circle of party elites, often predominately male. This lack of transparency enables patronage, favoritism, and gender bias. Women are especially affected, as they may be excluded from inner-party networks where these decisions are made, and are often held to higher standards of loyalty, visibility, or "winnability" without equal access to the resources or platforms needed to meet such expectations. This undermines fair competition and perpetuates the underrepresentation of women in electoral politics.

> *"Or sometimes it's like at the end, the party has to balance out different styles, states or areas to look at the whole picture to decide which is the most suitable candidate. So sometimes even with some women candidates, potential candidates have been working for quite some time in an area.* ***But at the end, maybe the party will be sending someone else for different reasons. It would be related to winnability because compared to men, the opportunity for women to become candidates is lesser.*** *So people will question, like, is it okay, this seat I give to women, will it affect the winnability, those kinds of issues?" [ADUN from Perak]*

Accessing political networks

At least two respondents highlighted that women face greater challenges in building and accessing political networks, which are often dominated by male leaders and established figures. In some cases, women must rely on the endorsement or reputation of senior male politicians to gain the trust of donors and secure financial backing.

> *"(On diversity of donors) No, definitely not. Because you see **in terms of economic power or those who are in charge of making financial decisions falls under whose power, mostly men.** And if these men are not conscious of equal representation, they will not blink their eyes. Second time when women ask for a donation. Right. Again, it's all because we do not have, you know, it's all progression, numbers of people, numbers of men in the decision making. So, you know, it's all interconnected." [Adun from Sabah]*

> *"Like for example, a male politician opened up the path, I think, for a few of us to be more visible. I think credit should be given to him for that…He helped the whole PJ area and **he had a lot of funders, big names and big money that came in. But he was very generous also**." [Former MP from Penang]*

This dependency reinforces gendered power dynamics within party structures and fundraising circles, making it harder for women to independently establish credibility and sustain long-term political careers.

> *"I think I made the comparison because I think the men's youth wing maybe because they have their own networking which is I think better networking with all the business people, you know, with all the high ranked people in the party or any organization." [MP from Melaka]*

Moral risks

In the absence of a Political Financing Act in Malaysia, respondents expressed concern about the association between politics and unethical practices, which creates a moral dilemma for women entering the field. Without clear regulations on campaign financing and fundraising, candidates are often forced to navigate opaque and unregulated funding channels, which can involve bribery, slander, or other forms of "dirty politics." This environment poses particular challenges for women, as four out of seven women respondents shared that they would prefer to operate on limited funding and risk electoral loss rather than compromising their integrity. Such ethical concerns, combined with the lack of institutional safeguards, may impact women's political participation and representation, as many are unwilling to engage in practices that conflict with their values or expose them to reputational harm.

"But I want you to maintain your integrity and your values. I know your values. ***You don't buy people's votes. You don't go out and manipulate, use dirty tactics*** *like other counterparts. If you really want to be a good political leader, then you have to maintain your grounds, your principles. And we are in the new movement setting a good example to our young generation to consciously try to clean up the political arena." [Former ADUN from Sabah]*

"This journey/experience has reaffirmed a core belief of mine: ***in politics, credibility, perseverance, and sincerity still matter even in the face of financial limitations****. While money undeniably plays a role, it is the trust of the people and the strength of one's convictions that ultimately carry a campaign forward. My journey in politics has never been backed by deep pockets. It has always been about responsibility and commitment, not career or chasing gold mines." [MP from Sarawak]*

Financial Hardship

A key finding from the interviews reveals that the financial strain of serving as an elected representative can be severe, particularly for those who are sole breadwinners. One experienced MP (opposition) shares that 60% of her salary is allocated to constituency service and party needs, leaving only 40% for personal and family expenses, insufficient to support a household with children in school and rising living costs. This has resulted in an inability to save, with monthly finances often in deficit. The respondent emphasised that if even seasoned politicians face such challenges, the burden would be even greater for new or aspiring women candidates, potentially discouraging their participation in electoral politics altogether.

"(From the salary) So ***I will allocate 40% only for my family and 60% goes to the Pusat Khidmat (Service Centre)*** *or parliament and also for the party matters. It's quite challenging. 40% is not enough because I have five kids and all of them are still studying and I have bills to pay. I mean the phone bills, the electricity, the food, everything and I have to be frank,* ***I cannot even do my own savings nowadays*** *because every month I have a negative amount in my bank. So if you ask me I need to come up with my own money which I don't have and I need to get my own funding. It will be very difficult for me to do so if I myself, an experienced MP and politician, feel this way. What about the new women (politicians) who want to involve and participate in the election?" [MP from Melaka]*

Worryingly, this lack of financial support for opposition MPs may discourage her from contesting the next election, as the financial burden of running a constituency, even with personal savings and crowdfunding has become unsustainable. This potentially threatens women's continued participation in electoral contests.

Culturally entrenched gender stereotype within indigenous communities hinders access to funding

Our research found that culturally entrenched gender stereotypes within indigenous communities, including among the Kadazandusun and Iban (Dayak) in Sabah and Sarawak, pose significant barriers to women's political participation. Two respondents from these communities pointed to traditional community hierarchies and rigid gender roles as obstacles to women entering politics. The lack of existing representation reinforces these norms, making it even harder for women to take up political space or be seen as legitimate candidates.

This underrepresentation also affects access to funding, as there is often less conviction in supporting women from minority or indigenous backgrounds. While women from political families may face fewer hurdles, their participation is still met with surprise and skepticism. One respondent recalled the astonishment of constituents during campaign walkabouts simply because she was a woman candidate. Nonetheless, their presence in the political arena is gradually helping to challenge and shift these long-standing cultural perceptions.

> *"When I first joined, being young, vulnerable and a Dayak Iban female in a male-dominated party was like walking in the dark looking for a black cat, but I was determined to stay, pursue, and learn the trade.* ***Dayaks, especially Dayak Iban, traditionally regard men as figureheads and superior in all aspects, while women have always played second fiddle and are domestically assigned****. Hence, engaging and participating in politics, especially for Iban women those days (in the 80s) was like prevailing against all odds." [MP From Sarawak]*

> *" (ON walkabouts) Open farmers market and when they see me coming down with the ADUN logo, they said, oh, are you the wife of so and so YB? I said, I am a YB.* ***And they were like, that's a woman YB?*** *I went to Papar, I went to Tambunan, you know the interior parts of Sabah. And then when they saw me, they thought I was a YB's wife. But when I introduced myself, they were like taking pictures and said how? I didn't know there's a woman YB.." [Former ADUN from Sabah]*

Strengthening Long-Term and Sustainable Support for Women

Long-term and sustainable funding for capacity building

The lack of dedicated funding for women's empowerment in politics remains a significant barrier to achieving gender parity in leadership. Despite rhetorical commitments to increasing women's representation, political parties and institutions often fail to allocate sufficient resources toward training, mentorship, and leadership development programmes specifically tailored for women.

Apart from MUDA, almost all political parties have a women's wing. It often plays a crucial role in grassroots mobilization, voter engagement, and promoting gender-responsive programs. However, these wings often operate with limited and inconsistent funding, as financial allocations from party headquarters typically prioritize central and state-level structures, with women's wings receiving only a small share, if any, after funds are distributed. As a result, women leaders frequently need to initiate their own fundraising efforts. Despite their important role in sustaining community engagement and advancing women's political participation, the underfunding of women's wings reflects broader gender imbalances in political financing and decision-making, forcing them to operate under resource constraints while continuing to deliver critical outreach work.

> *"That's always not enough because like the party funding from HQ it will first go to the state and then from state it will go to the women's wing and then the youth wing. So,* ***that's why the women's wings also need to find their own resources****, find their own way. Or nowadays maybe easier if some of the programs they can work with government agencies, corporates or NGOs who are more open to work with them. So that's how they try to sustain themselves.* ***Because funding from HQ, it's never enough.****....and the national women wing will also try to help the state women wing also." [ADUN from Perak, also Perak women's wing treasurer]*

In our interview, one respondent mentions that in an effort to strengthen women's political participation, the party's national and state women's wings initiated a dedicated fund called the 30% Representative Fund, aimed at supporting the goal of achieving at least 30% women's representation. However, these funds are to be raised internally among themselves.

> *"I think early this year or so the women's wing and National Women's wing started to have a fund called 30% representative funds.* ***So we try to fundraise among ourselves and then later try to expand it.*** *So then we will be using that one to support other candidates in terms of achieving 30%. (On pooling money) Depends what kind of project. Sometimes a few hundred thousands. So, maybe start with some capacity building to try to identify some potential candidates. At the moment we are focusing on capacity building so that we can identify more potential candidates and get ready to target some. Start the work early so that when it comes to seat negotiation or parties' decisions we have a better bargaining power and so that those potential candidates also made up their mind early." [ADUN from Perak]*

While some political parties have begun to restructure internal funding mechanisms to better support women's programmes, it looks like these efforts remain limited and largely driven by the initiative of state and national women's wings. Their focus on grooming potential candidates and building political capacity is commendable, but these are often short-term and reliant on project-based funding. There remains a critical need for political parties to establish long-term, sustainable funding structures dedicated to the continuous development of women leaders. Without consistent investment in leadership pipelines and structural support, progress toward gender equality in political representation will remain fragmented and difficult to sustain.

Male Allyship

Male allyship plays a critical role in advancing women's participation in politics. Four respondents mention the importance of support from male allies and established male political figures in helping women enter and thrive in the political arena.

Six out of seven women interviewed had previously worked as special officers to or with prominent male MPs, gaining vital experience, exposure, and networks through these roles. In some cases, male leaders not only mentored but also financed women candidates, significantly easing their path into politics. Parties like DAP have notably benefited from male champions who actively support and promote women, contributing to greater visibility and representation over time.

Conversely, in parties where women held senior leadership roles, there tend to be a higher number of women in elected positions—often because the executive committees support women's wing initiatives. However, even with this support, women still face deeply rooted gender stereotypes and structural challenges. At least four respondents stress that increasing women's political representation should not fall solely on women leaders or women's wings. Without greater involvement and commitment from male allies—particularly in terms of financing and public endorsement as well as taking on care work—the efforts to close the gender gap in politics will remain limited and uneven.

> *"So he loaned me money to pay for my deposit for parliament because it is a party that was built on the basis of volunteerism. Like for example,* ***he opened up the path, I think, for a few of us to be more visible.****" [Former MP from Penang]*

Comparative Studies - Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Philippine

In Southeast Asia, specific political financing policies that directly support or encourage women's entry into politics are limited, but there are emerging practices and policy proposals—particularly in countries like Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and the Philippines—that attempt to link gender equality goals with financial incentives or support.

Indonesia's Gender-Inclusive Political Financing and Representation Policies

Legislated Gender Quota (30% Rule)

Indonesia was one of the earliest Southeast Asian countries to introduce a gender quota for legislative elections. Law No. 8/2012 and Law No. 7/2017 made it mandatory for parties to include at least 30% women on their parliamentary candidate lists in each electoral district and the General Elections Commission (KPU) enforces this by rejecting party lists that do not meet the requirement, although enforcement has sometimes been inconsistent.

Women's representation in the national parliament (DPR) increased from 11.6% in 2004 to over 20.52% by 2019.(Prihatini, 2022, Figure 2) In some regional legislatures, the numbers are higher, although the national average still falls short of the 30% goal.

Party Financing and Indirect Support for Women

While Indonesia does not yet have direct earmarked public funding for women candidates, there are several features of its political financing system that indirectly support women's participation:

a) Public Subsidies to Political Parties

Political parties in Indonesia receive state subsidies based on the number of votes they win in elections. This vote-based public funding provides a more level playing field and reduces overreliance on private donors. While the funding amount is modest, it supports basic operations and can be used to fund candidate training and outreach—including for women.

b) Regulatory Space for Internal Party Reforms

Parties are encouraged (though not legally compelled) to implement internal regulations that promote gender equality. Some progressive parties, such as PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), have voluntarily established internal quotas, leadership development programs, and financial support mechanisms for women candidates.

c) Support from Civil Society and Electoral Bodies

The General Elections Commission (KPU) and Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) partner with civil society organizations (CSOs) and international donors (e.g., UNDP, International IDEA) to offer candidate training, campaign support, and financial literacy programs specifically for women. These efforts are essential to bridging the gap in campaign financing knowledge and access between male and female candidates.

Challenges and Gaps

Despite these positive policies, Indonesia still faces barriers. Some women are included on party lists just to meet the quota, as “seat warmers”, but not given winnable positions as the law requires 30% women on the list, but not necessarily electable ranks. More importantly, campaign financing remains a major obstacle for many women. Even though public funds are available, private donations still dominate, and male candidates tend to have more access to business networks and donor support.

Indonesia represents a hybrid model of gender-inclusive political reform: it combines legislated quotas, state party funding, and civil society engagement to promote women’s participation in politics. While not perfect, it provides a clear legal and institutional pathway for other countries to follow or adapt in efforts to achieve gender-equitable political representation.

Gender and Political Financing Policies in Timor-Leste

Legislated Gender Quotas

Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has made notable legal and institutional efforts to promote women's participation in politics, with a particular focus on gender quotas and electoral reforms. It has one of the strongest legal frameworks in Southeast Asia to promote women's political participation. Electoral Law (Law No. 6/2006) introduced a mandatory quota for women, which was later strengthened through Law No. 7/2011. Political parties must ensure that at least one out of every three candidates (i.e., 33%) on their Closed List Proportional Representation (CLPR) for parliamentary elections is a woman. The National Electoral Commission (CNE) and Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (STAE) are empowered to reject candidate lists that do not comply with this rule.

As a result, in the 2023 parliamentary elections, women held almost 34% of the seats (IPU, n.d.), far exceeding the regional average and surpassing the minimum 30% global benchmark set by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

In addition, Timor-Leste's Constitution (2002) enshrines gender equality. Article 17 states that "*women and men shall have the same rights and duties in all areas of family, cultural, social, economic and **political life***." Its National development strategies, including the National Gender Equality Policy, also emphasize increasing women's participation in decision-making, supported by gender-responsive budgeting efforts across ministries.

This elevated Timor-Leste as among the highest female parliamentary representation in Asia. Women's involvement in politics has been normalized and institutionalized, with strong visibility of women in leadership roles and resulting in growing public acceptance of women politicians, particularly at the national level.

Indirect Financial Incentives

Timor-Leste does not have a formal public funding law that earmarks money for women candidates, but there are indirect financial incentives and enabling environments that support gender parity, such as:-

a) Donor agencies and international NGOs, such as UN Women and International IDEA, have funded training programs, campaign support, and capacity building specifically for women candidates.

b) The quota system lowers the cost barrier by guaranteeing women a place on party lists, reducing the need for costly individual campaigning to secure nominations.

c) Some political parties have adopted internal mechanisms to financially support female candidates—though these are informal and vary by party.

Civil Society and Institutional Support

Timor-Leste's success in women's political inclusion is partly due to strong collaboration between the state and civil society such as Rede Feto, Alola Foundation, and Asaun Feto Iha Politika (AFP) have provided financial and logistical support for women candidates, including transportation, materials, and campaign advice.

Gaps and Remaining Challenges

Local politics remains male-dominated, especially at the village (suco) level. Many women politicians still face economic dependence, lack of campaign resources, and social resistance in rural areas. Its lack of formal political financing law that specifically addresses the financial needs or disadvantages faced by women candidates has presented several challenges. Political parties are not legally required to allocate equitable financial support to female candidates, thus, women particularly with less seniority or weaker networks, may not receive sufficient internal funding from their party to run competitive campaigns. Party elites - often male - still hold control over fundraising and resource distribution. This challenge is compounded when campaigns are done in remote areas, with significantly higher logistic expenses. Also, political financing in Timor-Leste lacks strong transparency requirements for donation and expenditures. In this unregulated environment, women - who often lack the same donor access or experience with campaign financing - are at a disadvantage compared to male counterparts who navigate these informal systems more easily.

Timor-Leste's gender quota system and strong institutional oversight have significantly improved women's descriptive political representation. While there is no gender-specific public financing law, the legal guarantee of women's candidacy, combined with civil society support and international donor funding, effectively reduces financial barriers for women.

Women's Political Representation and Political Financing in the Philippines

The Philippines has made notable strides in advancing women's political participation compared to many of its Southeast Asian counterparts. It has consistently ranked among the top countries in the region for gender equality in politics, with women holding high-level positions including the presidency (e.g., Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo), senatorial seats, and local executive offices. However, these individual successes often mask deeper systemic barriers that continue to limit broader and more inclusive participation by women, particularly in terms of equitable access to political financing.

Institutional Pathways for Women: The Party-List System

A key mechanism aimed at enhancing representation for marginalized sectors, including women, is the Closed List Proportional Representation (CLPR) system, established through the Party-List System Act of 1995. Under the hybrid or Mixed Member Majoritarian (MMM) system, 80% of the seats in the House of Representatives are elected by the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system while the remaining 20% are elected through CLPR for the representation of marginalised sectors. It was designed to give voice to underrepresented sectors such as women, laborers, farmers, and indigenous communities.

Women's groups such as the Gabriela Women's Party and Kabataan Party-list have successfully used this platform to secure legislative seats and push for gender-sensitive policies. Gabriela, in particular, has been instrumental in advancing landmark laws on violence against women, reproductive health, and gender-based discrimination. This model has allowed non-traditional and grassroots candidates, especially women activists and civil society leaders, to enter formal politics without going through the traditional political party gatekeeping structures.

However, the party-list system is not without flaws. In recent years, it has been criticized for being co-opted by political dynasties and interest groups, thereby diluting its original purpose. In practice, many women still face significant barriers to entry, especially those without ties to political elites or funding networks.

Political Financing: Gaps in Gender-Sensitive Policy

In the Philippines, political campaigns remain largely privately funded, with candidates relying heavily on personal wealth, family networks, or private donors. Although the Omnibus Election Code and the Fair Election Act regulate aspects of campaign finance, such as spending limits, reporting, and advertising, there are no legal provisions specifically addressing the gendered impact of political finance.

This absence of gender-sensitive financing policy disproportionately affects women. Female candidates, particularly those from outside political dynasties, often lack access to high-value donors or business backers. Many are forced to self-finance their campaigns, which limits their competitiveness, particularly in expensive electoral contests such as senatorial or mayoral races. Moreover, the high cost of campaigning in the Philippines, including media exposure, transportation, and staff salaries, creates an uneven playing field where only candidates with substantial resources can viably compete (Pamintuan, 2025).

The Role of Civil Society and Women's Movements

Despite these limitations, civil society organizations and women's rights movements in the Philippines have played a crucial role in closing the gender gap in political participation. Groups such as Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB), PILIPINA, and Center for Legislative Development (CLD) have organized training programs for women aspiring to public office, educated voters on gender issues, and advocated for reforms in campaign finance and political party laws.

These groups have also worked to raise awareness about the need for public funding models that incentivize parties to nominate women or directly support female candidates, However, no such mechanisms currently exist in the Philippines, and most efforts remain driven by NGOs or individual advocacy.

While the Philippines has made important progress in women's political representation, particularly through its party-list system and civil society engagement, financial inequality remains a major obstacle. Without structural reforms to address the gendered dynamics of campaign financing, many women will continue to face unequal opportunities to run, win, and lead in politics. Gender-sensitive political finance policies are not just tools for fairness—they are essential to building a more inclusive and representative democracy.

Policy Recommendations

To strengthen women's political representation, Malaysia should adopt a combination of structural and institutional reforms. Together, these reforms would help level the playing field, reduce systemic barriers, and move Malaysia closer to achieving genuine gender parity in politics. Below are the six recommendations: -

Introducing Closed List Proportional Representation (CLPR) seats with gender quota implemented through placement rules

Currently, women politicians are trapped in a vicious cycle where their low prospect of getting candidacy under FPTP lowers their prospect of getting political funds which in turn limits their growth towards electability. This impeding ecology does not eliminate all female candidates, but produces a small group of female political stars who can tap into the predominantly male-dominated funding networks while keeping other women politicians at bay. Introducing CLPR seats, with an effective placement rule for gender quota, alongside the existing FPTP seats not only increases the number of women candidates, but also addresses the funding challenge for less established women candidates in two ways. Firstly, as CLPR seats are won collectively using party machinery, women candidates need less of individual resources in campaigning. Second, with increased electability, women candidates are better positioned to tap into more funding networks.

Enacting Political Finance Act and public funding for Political Parties

Besides promoting transparency, accountability, and equity in political finance, a Political Finance Act with an element of public funding for political parties can reduce candidates' dependence on private donors and therefore level the playing field, especially for candidates from underrepresented or less affluent backgrounds.

Setting aside portion of public funding specifically to incentivise women's political participation and representation

Embedding gender-responsive provisions into the public financing framework, for example setting aside a dedicated portion to be distributed to political parties based on number of women representatives, would encourage the parties to prioritise gender diversity in candidate selection and leadership development.

Legislating Equitable Constituency Development Funds (CDF)

When constituency development funds are weaponised by exclusive or lopsided allocation to government backbenchers, it hurts the election or re-election chances of women candidates in opposition parties. Over time, this may reduce women lawmakers in the discriminated opposition parties, and if their replacements are male, the overall percentage of women's representation would likely fall. Hence, enacting equitable CDF laws at both Federal and state levels may help increase women's representation besides ensuring equal access to public funds for all elected representatives.

Implementing Party-Level Quotas and Financial Support Structures

Before the creation of CLPR seats, voluntary gender quotas should be introduced by individual parties or coalitions upon their FPTP candidates and party leadership. Structured financial support should be provided to female candidates with insufficient means. Lastly, campaign resources such as funding for logistics, advertising, and outreach materials should be allocated transparently equitably.

Providing Capacity Building and Financial Literacy Training

Providing training on campaign budgeting, financial planning, fundraising strategies, and navigating party finance mechanisms. These programs can enhance candidates' confidence and ability to run cost-effective campaigns.

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