Women and Malaysian Politics: Challenges as Mediators in Political Leadership

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Abstract: *The role of women in Malaysian politics is often coloured by unique and complex challenges, including the need to act as mediators in political leadership. In this context, a mediator refers to an individual who acts as an intermediary or a connector between parties with differing views or interests. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail made history as the first woman appointed as Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2018, paving the way for more women to enter politics. Although there has been an increase in the number of women involved in politics, there remains a significant gap that needs to be addressed, especially in tackling stereotypes and gender discrimination. Women often play a crucial role in uniting different viewpoints, resolving conflicts, and promoting inclusive participation in the decision-making process. This study delves into the challenges faced by women as mediators in political leadership, including the influence of patriarchal culture, power imbalances, and negative societal perceptions. Therefore, despite the National Policy on Women and various initiatives introduced to empower women, their implementation needs to be improved to achieve true gender equality. To overcome these challenges, Malaysia needs to take strategic steps such as strengthening laws that ensure women's human rights, raising societal awareness, and providing equal opportunities for women in politics.*

Keywords: Women, Malaysian Politics, Mediator, Political Leadership, Gender Equality
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1. Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in political leadership roles remains a significant issue globally, with barriers that limit women's political agency and influence. In Malaysia, despite progress in gender equality, women continue to face systemic challenges in achieving leadership positions within the political sphere. The 15th General Election (GE-15), held in 2022, marked a pivotal moment in Malaysia's political landscape, culminating in the formation of a Unity Government. This coalition, consisting of major political parties such as Pakatan Harapan (PH), Barisan Nasional (BN), and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), represented a shift in the political environment. Notably, GE-15 also saw an increase in the number of female candidates and elected representatives in both Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (Moten, 2023).

However, gendered dynamics within the Malaysian political system persist, reinforcing male-dominated structures and limiting women's full participation in leadership. These barriers are deeply rooted in intersectional factors such as party politics, gender stereotypes, and societal norms (Sukhani, 2020). Despite historical milestones, such as the appointment of Wan Azizah

Wan Ismail as Malaysia's first female Deputy Prime Minister in 2018, women's political empowerment remains constrained by structural and cultural limitations. Her brief tenure symbolized the potential for greater female involvement but also highlighted the fragility of women's leadership positions in a volatile political environment (Mohamad, 2018).

This article seeks to explore the ongoing challenges faced by women in Malaysian politics, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions. Through an examination of political structures, gender biases, and intersectionality, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors that hinder women's political participation. By engaging with current literature on political empowerment and feminist political theory, this study offers new insights into how these barriers can be dismantled and what reforms are necessary for achieving greater gender parity in Malaysian political leadership. The research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality, emphasizing the urgent need for systemic change to foster a more inclusive and representative political system in Malaysia.

Figure 1: Wan Azizah Wan Ismail was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister.
(Source: Sinar Harian, 2019).

Mediator in Political Leadership

A mediator in political leadership refers to an individual who acts as an intermediary or connector between parties with differing views or interests (Zhomartkyzy, 2023). Women as mediators in politics play a crucial role in uniting diverse perspectives, resolving conflicts, and promoting inclusive participation in decision-making processes. In the context of Malaysia, this role is even more important given the strong cultural and social challenges that still influence gender roles. Women who achieve significant positions in politics often face stereotypes and discrimination, yet their role as mediators can help foster a more balanced and just political environment.

Mediation has been an integral part of Malaysia's dispute resolution landscape for over 20 years, evolving as a modern problem-solving mechanism applicable to various industries (Abraham, 2023). The establishment of institutions to train mediators and facilitate the registration of cases underscores Malaysia's commitment to formalizing this practice. Furthermore, Malaysia stands out in the region as one of the first countries to enact a Mediation Act. This Act includes notable provisions such as granting immunity to trained mediators, ensuring their neutrality and encouraging their effective involvement in resolving disputes.

In Malaysia, mediation encompasses both court-annexed processes—often conducted without the presence of lawyers—and private, ad hoc, or institutional mediation (Abraham, 2023). In private mediations, lawyers play a critical role, from designing mediation overtures to supporting their clients throughout the resolution process. This diversity in mediation practices reflects its adaptability and increasing importance in Malaysia's socio-political and economic spheres.

Despite Malaysia's commendable strides in education, gender disparities persist in workforce participation and leadership roles. Education is mandatory up to the sixth grade of primary school, with enrollment rates exceeding 98 percent for both boys and girls. Yet, this success in education has not translated into equitable workforce engagement. As of 2022, only 55.9 percent of Malaysian women were active in the labor force compared to 82 percent of men (Wahab and Abdullah, 2023). This disparity highlights a systemic issue where women's educational accomplishments are undermined by societal expectations, workplace inequalities, and structural barriers.

One of the primary obstacles to higher female workforce participation lies in entrenched traditional gender roles. Women are often expected to prioritize household responsibilities and caregiving over professional or leadership aspirations. This cultural expectation limits their opportunities to pursue long-term careers, leaving many women in vulnerable or informal employment. The persistent gender pay gap further discourages women from joining or remaining in the workforce. Women often earn significantly less than their male counterparts for similar roles and qualifications. Addressing this disparity requires not only policy reforms but also cultural shifts to redefine societal expectations around gender roles in professional and domestic settings.

To address these challenges, the Madani economic initiative, launched in 2023, aims to increase female workforce participation to 60 percent by creating more inclusive and equitable opportunities (Abdul Aziz, 2023). However, the success of this initiative will depend on its ability to provide tangible, sustainable solutions that tackle both societal perceptions and systemic barriers.

In the political realm, women's representation has shown incremental progress. By 2022, women held 17.9 percent of Malaysia's cabinet ministerial positions, marking a two percent increase from the previous year (Che Noh, 2022). While this is a step in the right direction, it still falls short of the 30 percent quota targeted for women in top political roles. Achieving this benchmark requires a concerted effort to create pathways for women to access leadership positions, supported by policies that promote gender parity within political institutions.

Beyond politics, women are also making strides in corporate leadership. By 2023, women occupied 40 percent of senior management roles, a three percent increase from 2021 (Baqutayan and Razak, 2022). These figures indicate a positive trend toward gender diversity in decision-making positions. However, the journey to full equality is far from complete, as systemic challenges and biases against women in leadership persist.

Despite progress in women's empowerment, societal mindsets that perpetuate stereotypes about gender roles remain a significant hurdle. According to a 2023 study, while 45 percent of Malaysian respondents expressed no gender preference for political leaders, 43 percent still preferred men for leadership positions (Statista Research Department, 2024). This underscores

the importance of sustained efforts to shift societal perceptions and promote women's roles as mediators and leaders.

Mediation—both in politics and other industries—offers a pathway for fostering inclusivity and equitable decision-making. By enhancing training programs, strengthening institutional support, and addressing societal biases, Malaysia can continue to leverage mediation as a modern and effective problem-solving mechanism, while also advancing gender equality across all sectors.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design
To explore more about the challenges faced by women as mediators in political leadership within Malaysian politics, a robust data collection methodology should be collected to have a factual proof on the differences between men and women politicians. This section outlines the specific methods, and procedures used to gather a comprehensive and credible study. The component focuses on factual data, investigative perception into the involvement and participation of women in Malaysian politics. This part of the study aims to discover the causes of their challenges, strategies for mediation, and their overall impact on their political leadership career. As we know the main factors for the women to face challenges as mediators in political leadership is because of Gender bias and discrimination, Media coverage and stereotyping and Family responsibilities and influences. Hence, the methodology has clearly proved the under-representation of women in politics as mediators by accuracy of the results obtained.

2.2 Quantitative Component
The aim of this quantitative component is to provide the pragmatic data that complements and compromise the statement made earlier regarding the challenges faced by women as a mediator in political leadership. This part of the study involves the collection and analysis of the statistical data to identify the patterns and comparability related to women's participation and leadership in Malaysian politics. One of the ways used to collect data is the data analysis method and by using this method we can obtain an accurate quantity of women participated in Malaysia's political parties. Data analysis are factual government reports, political party records, and previous research studies which was surveyed by researchers has been analysed to provide a contextual background and support to the statement made earlier. Therefore, the data that has been obtained is directly from the government updates about the quantity and proportion of female representative in each state all over Malaysia and the quantity of female candidates in each political party in Malaysia.

The data analysis process requires several steps to ensure an in-depth understanding of the research results. Statistical analysis of the survey data is conducted to identify significant quantity and proportion of female representative in each state all over Malaysia and the quantity of female candidates in each political party in Malaysia. Descriptive statistics is obtained to summarize the demographic data and extract accurate information regarding the differences in quantity between male and female participation in Malaysia's political party and parliamentary seats.

Inferential statistics to test hypotheses and identify significant differences in data analysis to explore relationships between different variables. The results from the quantitative analyses are then integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by women in

Malaysian politics and their roles as mediators by differentiating the proportion of women that has secured the seat at parliament for each state in Malaysia. This study has conducted in a very strict ethical guidelines to ensure that the collected data is factual and not been modified for the convenience of any. It is also been checked thoroughly that all the information extracted from the online websites are valid and not inaccurately misinterpreted.

3. Results and Discussion: Women in Malaysian Politics

3.1 Overview of Data
The data collected from the survey has given the accurate number of women's participation in "Political Party" and number of "Parliamentary Seats" that has been allocated for women in Malaysian political parties and the extracted data offers valuable insights into the representation of women in Malaysian politics, specifically focusing on the 15th General Election (PRU 15) and the composition of female MPs in 2023.

3.2 Female Representation in Political Parties
The Political Party graph details the number of female candidates and MPs across various political parties in Malaysia. From the data extracted in Table 1 (Figure 1) the main four parties selected for the comparisons are The Barisan Nasional (BN), Pakatan Harapan (PH), Perikatan Nasional (PN) and Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Pejuang). As by Barisan Nasional (BN) they were a total of 176 candidates participated in the PRU15 which was divided into a proportion of 154 male candidates and 22 female candidates. Hence the percentage of female candidates were participated in this party is accurately about 13% only. From the election, they were 29 MPs elected altogether and women only manage to place 3 seats and men placed 26 seats. The percentage of female MPs are only 10% and from this we can see clearly that male is dominating the politic field compare to women. In Pakatan Harapan(PH) 206 candidates were participated and it was divided proportionally into 166 male candidates and 40 female candidates. Eventhough the female candidate's participation is higher compare to Barisan Nasional but still the female candidate's percentage is accurately around 19% only. From the election,82 MPs were successfully elected but women were only managed to secure 16 seats compare to man had conquered 66 seats. The percentage of female participant is only 20% which proves that women do faces gender bias in political arena.

Furthermore, in Perikatan Nasional (PN) there was only 16 female candidates participated from the total amount of 171 candidates altogether. Men had covered a huge number of participations which is around 155 participants. The percentage of female candidates were around 9% only which decreases compare to the percentage of Barisan Nasional and Pakatan harapan. The percentage had a drastic fall from a two-digit number to a one-digit number. Hence, from this party they were a total of 74 MPs elected which contributed by only 7 female MPs only. Men had successfully obtained 67 seats and still dominating the political dominant power. The percentage of female MPs is only 7% and it is the least percentage among all four parties which are used randomly in this discussion to do the comparison of gender bias and challenge of women as mediator in political leadership.

Lastly, Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (PEJUANG) party has a total number of 121 candidates which includes 16 female candidates and 105 male candidates. The percentage of female candidates is only 13% and none of this party members were elected as MPs in 2023 PRU15.In conclusion, from the result extracted from the data of the four parties it is clearly shown that man holds a strong place in politics compare to women. Women participation are much more lesser

compare to men participation and the MPs elected also are dominated by men. Refer to Figure 1.1 to have a clear understanding of the statement made above.

3.3 Female Representation Across States

The "Parliamentary Seats" data provides a state-wise breakdown of female candidates and their proportions relative to the total number of candidates. In this data analysis, Table 2 (Figure 2) shows the female representation and the parliament seat proportion for female across the states. Four states are used randomly to analyse the female representation across states to proof the statement of women faces gender inequality as a political leadership. The four states which has been used to extract the data is Kedah, Perlis, Pulau Pinang and Perak. In Kedah, there were a total candidate of 62 candidates participated where women have only given 7 seats compare to men has 55 seats altogether. The proportion allocated for women in Kedah was only 11.29% which proofs that men and women are not treated equally and men dominates the parliament seats. In Perlis, they were only 13 candidates were involved in the parliament seats and women holds approximately 2 seats which equals to 15.38% accurately. Although, the percentage of women is higher compare to Kedah state but it does not proof that women are treated equally because the male participant is still dominating the parliament seats.

Furthermore, In Pulau Pinang, there was only 7 women candidates participated in the total amount of 58 candidates. The proportion of women candidates and 12.07% and men are 87.93%. The difference between women and men proportions are imbalance which proofs again that women are not given equal chances as men. In Perak,100 candidates were participated in the parliament but only 8 seats were allocated for women which is in proportion of 8% only. In conclusion, the extracted data has clearly proofed the statement of woman facing genderism in political leadership. Refer to figure 1.2 to have a better understanding of the statements made above.

3.4 Discussion

The data highlights of several important points regarding the participation and representation of women in Malaysian politics. The percentage of female candidates and MPs is comparably lower than the male contribution in the political parties. While Pakatan Harapan (PH) shows a relatively higher proportion of female candidates (19%) and MPs (20%), other parties like Perikatan Nasional (PN) and Barisan Nasional (BN) is still in lack of women's involvement in the political parties. This disparity outcomes the continues gender gap for women in political representation in Malaysia. The lack of representation of women in politics can be impute to Malaysia's firmly established patriarchal political culture. Traditional gender roles and society expectations towards a woman can discourage them to achieve more in this political career.

This gender bias and inequality will result in their underrepresentation of women. The state-wise data shows immensely variation in the proportion of female candidates across different states. For an example, Perlis has a higher proportion of female candidates (15.38%) compared to states like Perak (8%) and Kedah (11.29%). These variations could reflect in different local cultures in their specific states towards a woman participating in politics and the dominant of a gender in a family. Women also face significant barriers to political news and info because of their limited access to the political field, financial imbalance and the limited quota proportion to women compare to a man. These challenges also discourage their ability to secure their seats in parliament and to become a political leader. To overcome this obstacle faced by the female political representation, Malaysian government should increase the women gender quotas and should treat women equally which can ensure a higher participation from the woman community. Women also should be provided with financial help from to government so that they could mitigate the economic barriers.

4. Conclusion

Malaysia is recognized as progressive in advancing gender equality and women's rights. However, significant gaps remain in women's political representation and leadership, highlighting the need for targeted measures to address the socio-cultural and institutional barriers they face. These challenges limit their full participation in politics, which is crucial for achieving inclusive governance. By examining historical contexts, socio-cultural norms, and political structures, this analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles and strategies necessary for enhancing women's roles in political leadership. Socio-cultural factors, such as entrenched patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, have long confined women to domestic responsibilities, limiting their visibility in public life.

Cultural and religious influences further reinforce these roles, making it difficult for women to pursue political careers or leadership positions. Pervasive stereotypes that undermine women's competence and authority only exacerbate this issue, creating a cycle of underrepresentation and societal bias that stifles women's aspirations in the political arena. Institutional challenges compound these socio-cultural barriers. Political parties in Malaysia remain male-dominated, offering women fewer opportunities to occupy influential roles. The lack of gender quotas or policies promoting women's inclusion further restricts their ability to engage fully in political processes. Financial barriers and limited access to resources also disproportionately affect women, reducing their capacity to compete in elections. These systemic issues highlight the need for comprehensive reforms to level the playing field for women in politics.

Malaysia's position in global rankings reflects the disparity in women's political representation. The 2022 Global Gender Gap Index placed Malaysia 103rd out of 146 countries, significantly behind regional neighbors such as Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia. While Malaysia performs well in health and education metrics, its standing in political participation lags far behind. In contrast, Rwanda has achieved remarkable success, with 61% of parliamentary seats and 50% of ministerial positions occupied by women, demonstrating the transformative impact of systemic gender reforms.

Despite these challenges, Malaysian women have made significant contributions as mediators in political leadership. Female politicians bring unique qualities such as empathy, effective communication, and collaborative approaches to resolving conflicts and fostering consensus. These attributes have proven instrumental in bridging political divides and promoting stability. Prominent female leaders in Malaysia have exemplified these traits, showcasing the potential for women to drive inclusive governance and equitable decision-making.

4.1 Key Findings
Women's political participation in Malaysia remains low, with only a small percentage holding ministerial positions or running as candidates in elections. This disparity persists despite their significant progress in other areas of social and economic life.

Deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes present major barriers to women's political engagement. These cultural biases perpetuate traditional gender roles, limiting women's visibility and aspirations in the political sphere.

Institutional factors further hinder women's participation in politics. Male-dominated party structures, the absence of gender quotas, and systemic barriers within the electoral system

reduce opportunities for women to hold influential roles. Financial constraints and limited access to networks also disproportionately affect women aspiring to political leadership.

Comparative examples highlight the potential of systemic reforms in promoting gender equality. For instance, Rwanda's success in achieving high levels of female representation in governance underscores the effectiveness of gender quotas and supportive policies. Women's unique skills as mediators in political leadership have proven valuable in fostering inclusive governance. Attributes such as empathy, effective communication, and the ability to build consensus have been instrumental in resolving political conflicts and driving collaborative decision-making. To enhance women's political participation, strategies such as implementing gender quotas, providing leadership training, and running public awareness campaigns are essential. These efforts can help challenge societal biases and create a more supportive environment for women in politics.

The Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 provides an opportunity to integrate women's empowerment into Malaysia's national development agenda. By addressing the structural and cultural barriers to women's participation, Malaysia can ensure that no one is left behind in its pursuit of equitable and sustainable growth.

Women's contribution to political leadership is critical for achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive governance. Prioritizing women's empowerment and creating pathways for their active engagement in politics will enable Malaysia to progress toward a more equitable and forward-thinking society. This vision aligns with the broader goals of national development and social equity under the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030.

4.2 Addressing the Challenges

To enhance women's political participation and leadership in Malaysia, a multifaceted approach is needed. Policy reforms are essential to create an enabling environment for women's political engagement. Implementing gender quotas and affirmative action policies can help ensure equal opportunities for women in politics. These measures should be supported by robust legal protections to safeguard women's rights and promote gender equality in political processes.

Political parties must adopt internal mechanisms to promote gender equality, such as mentorship programs, leadership training, and support networks for women candidates. By creating a more inclusive party culture, political parties can provide women with the necessary support and opportunities to advance in political leadership.

Empowerment programs and initiatives are also crucial in enhancing women's political participation. These programs should focus on building women's confidence, skills, and networks, enabling them to compete effectively in the political arena. Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play a vital role in supporting these efforts through advocacy, capacity-building, and awareness-raising activities. By challenging societal stereotypes and promoting gender equality, these organizations can contribute to changing attitudes and perceptions towards women in politics.

4.3 Implications for Future Political Dynamics

Increased participation of women in political leadership has far-reaching implications for Malaysia's political landscape. Women's unique perspectives and approaches to mediation can contribute to more inclusive and effective governance. As mediators, women can help bridge

divides, foster dialogue, and promote consensus-building, leading to more stable and cohesive political environments.

Moreover, the presence of women in political leadership roles can inspire and empower future generations of women to pursue political careers. By breaking down barriers and challenging traditional gender roles, women leaders can pave the way for a more inclusive and representative political system. This transformation is essential for achieving a truly representative democracy in Malaysia.

The active and equitable participation of women in politics is not only a matter of justice and equality but also a necessity for effective governance and sustainable development. Inclusive political systems that reflect the diversity of society are better equipped to address the needs and concerns of all citizens. By harnessing the potential of women as mediators and leaders, Malaysia can build a more resilient and dynamic political landscape.

Final Thoughts
The journey towards gender equality in Malaysian politics is ongoing, and significant challenges remain. However, this thesis has demonstrated that by understanding and addressing these challenges, and by recognizing the critical contributions of women as mediators, meaningful progress can be made. The strategies and recommendations outlined in this research provide a roadmap for enhancing women's participation and leadership in Malaysian politics.

Future research should continue to explore the evolving dynamics of women's political participation in Malaysia, considering the impact of changing socio-cultural and political contexts. Longitudinal studies that track the progress of women's political engagement over time can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of policy interventions and empowerment programs. Additionally, comparative studies that examine the experiences of women in politics across different countries can offer lessons and best practices that can be adapted to the Malaysian context.

In conclusion, the active and equitable participation of women in political leadership is crucial for achieving a truly representative and inclusive political system in Malaysia. By addressing the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that hinder women's political participation, and by recognizing and supporting their roles as mediators, Malaysia can move towards a more equitable and effective governance system. This thesis has aimed to contribute to this discourse by providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities for women in Malaysian politics, highlighting the importance of their roles as mediators in political leadership. As Malaysia continues to evolve, the contributions of women in politics will be essential in shaping a more inclusive and representative political landscape.

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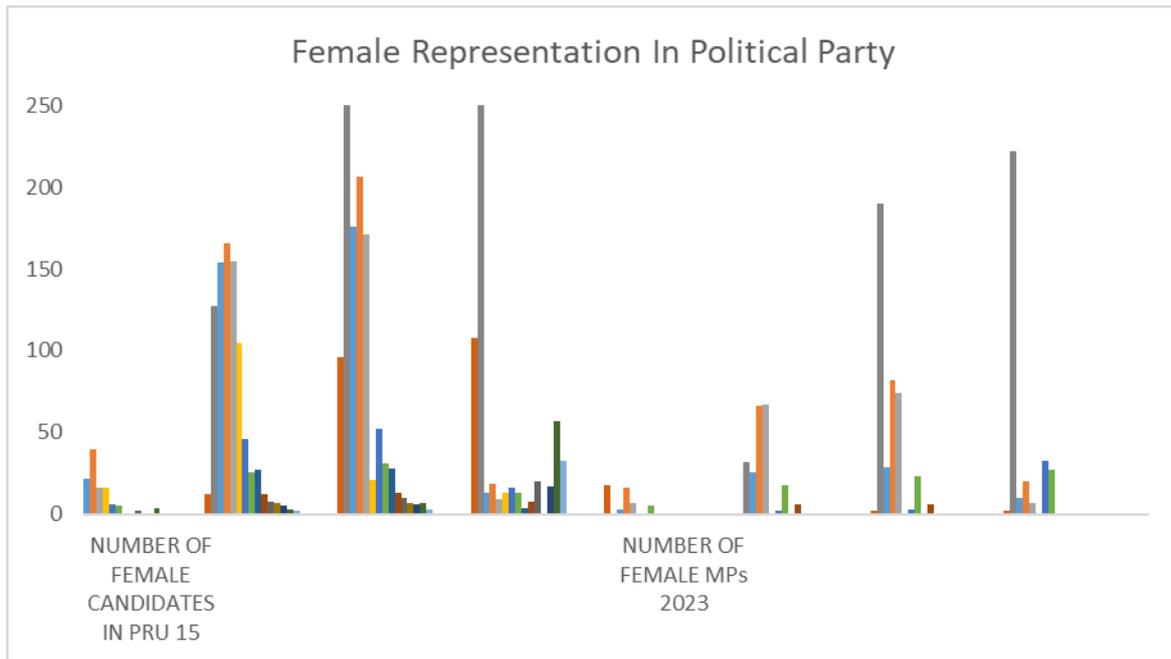
Appendices

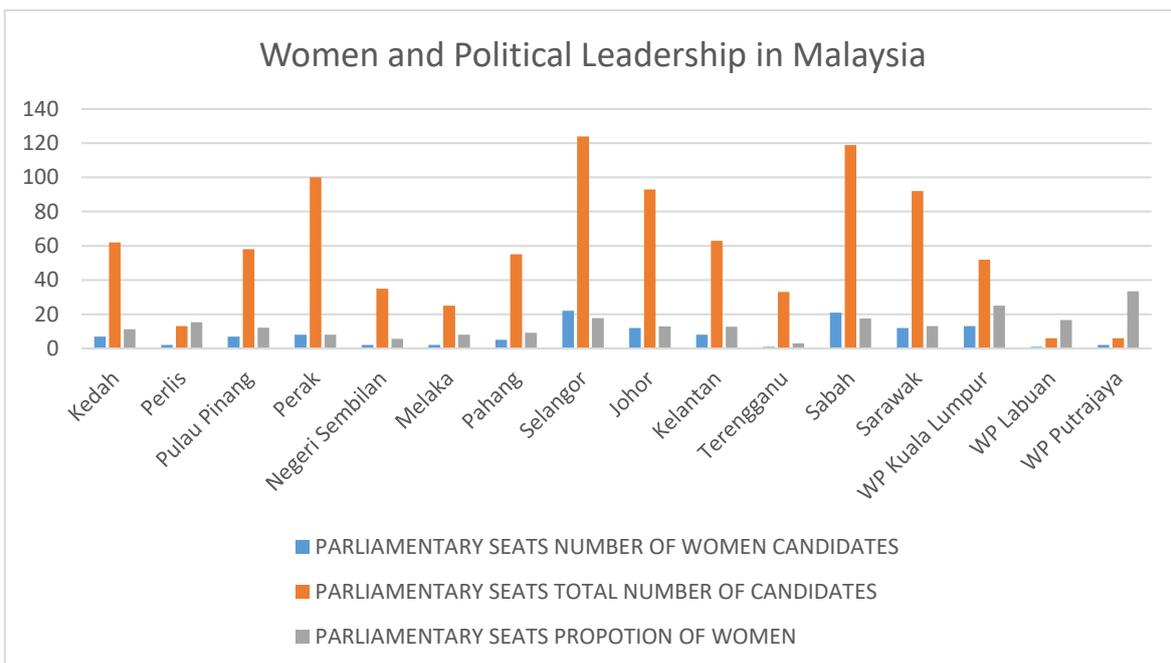**Figure 1: Female Representation in Political Party**

Figure 2: Female Representation Across States (2022)

Table 1: Female Representation in Political Party

POLITICAL PARTY	NUMBER OF FEMALE CANDIDATES IN PRU 15				NUMBER OF FEMALE MPs 2023			
	WOMEN	MEN	TOTAL	%WOMEN	WOMEN	MEN	TOTAL	%WOMEN
Barisan Nasional	22	154	176	13	3	26	29	10
Pakatan harapan	40	166	206	19	16	66	82	20
Perikatan Nasional	16	155	171	9	7	67	74	7
Parti Pejuang Tanah Air	16	105	21	13	0	0	0	0
Parti Warisan Sabah	6	46	52	16	1	2	3	33
Gabungan Parti Sarawak	5	26	31	13	5	18	23	27
Parti Rakyat Malaysia	1	27	28	4	0	0	0	0
Parti gabungan Rakyat Sabah	1	12	13	8	0	6	6	0
Parti Sarawak Bersatu	2	8	10	20	0	0	0	0
Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Masyarakat	0	7	7	0	0	1	1	0
Ikatan Demokratik Malaysia	1	5	6	17	0	1	1	0
Parti Kebangsaan Sabah	4	3	7	57	0	1	1	0
Parti Bangsa Malaysia	1	2	3	33	0	0	0	0
Parti Utama Rakyat	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parti Sosialis Malaysia	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parti Bersatu Rakyat sabah	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parti Perpaduan Rakyat Sabah	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parti Bumi Kenyalan	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parti Sedar Rakyat Sarawak	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Independence Candidates	12	96	108	18	0	2	2	0
TOTAL	**127**	**818**	**945**		**32**	**190**	**222**	

Table 2: Female Representation Across States (2022)

STATE	PARLIAMENTARY SEATS		
	NUMBER OF WOMEN CANDIDATES	TOTAL NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	PROPOTION OF WOMEN
Kedah	7	62	11.29
Perlis	2	13	15.38
Pulau Pinang	7	58	12.07
Perak	8	100	8
Negeri Sembilan	2	35	5.71
Melaka	2	25	8
Pahang	5	55	9.09
Selangor	22	124	17.74
Johor	12	93	12.9
Kelantan	8	63	12.7
Terengganu	1	33	3.03
Sabah	21	119	17.65
Sarawak	12	92	13.04
WP Kuala Lumpur	13	52	25
WP Labuan	1	6	16.67
WP Putrajaya	2	6	33.34

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