

Malaysia: Additional Women Representatives Must Make Real Impact

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As an organisation which upholds gender equality and social justice, the Women's Centre for Change (WCC) welcomes the Penang Chief Minister's recent announcement of its "Top-Up Women Only Additional Seats" (TWOAS) for the state legislative assembly, the first of its kind in the country.

While Malaysia has acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) since 1995, progress for women in political decisionmaking has been slow. For 25 years, we have never achieved the minimum 30% representation of women in Parliament, let alone in any state legislative assembly.

Without special measures such as TWOAS, it will take decades, if not a lifetime, before gender balance is achieved. We are proud that Penang has taken this bold and long overdue step forward, demonstrating its practical commitment to gender equality.

Thirty per cent is merely a minimum threshold; a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Ultimately, in line with its Gender Inclusiveness Policy, the Penang state government should continue to strive for its target 40:40:20 balance in gender representation at decisionmaking levels, including through fielding more women candidates for election in winnable seats.

Numbers alone are not enough. Though important, simply having more women ADUNs does not necessarily translate to better representation on gender issues. Because TWOAS representatives will be nominated based on the proportion won by each political party in the state assembly, it may be difficult for these additional women leaders to respond on critical gender issues if they are expected to toe the party line should there be a conflict in views. A woman leader whose party sees sexual harassment as the fault of the victim, for example, may not be in a position to speak up openly against such forms of violence. If that is the case, little real change can be expected.

Selected TWOAS women leaders must be gender sensitive and be able to speak up, act and make a practical difference for women in the state. For instance, violence against women and children, including domestic and sexual violence, is a serious and longstanding concern which requires concerted action from all quarters.

In the long run, not only our electoral system but also our political culture needs to shift towards a more mature democracy, where partisan politics can finally give way to debates and action on issues of substance, at policy, planning and implementation levels.

WCC welcomes such affirmative action such as TWOAS, to accelerate the equal representation of women in decisionmaking not only at the Penang state level, but also at the Federal government level.

Women's Centre for Change

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