

Malaysia: Make Space For Women's Leadership and Political Participation

Thursday 18 June 2020, by [JAG](#) (Date first published: 12 June 2020).

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) demands that women's voices critical of the government and political participation should be met with respect and dignity rather than intimidation - as evident by the police investigation of the Former Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development and of organisers of Women's March MY.

YB Hannah Yeoh has been called in for questioning by the police for a tweet she made in March following the appointment of a PAS MP as Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development: "What will happen to our national road map to fight child marriage with the appointment of MP from PAS as the deputy minister of KPWKM?"

Just several days ago, organisers of the Women's March MY 2020 were called in for investigation under the Peaceful Assembly Act, despite having given the police ample notice and cooperated with the police prior and on the day of the march. The police are familiar with the modus operandi of the organisers as this is the fourth year that the march is being held in Malaysia; and every year without fail, the organisers are called up to IPD Dang Wangi for an investigation. Women's March MY raised important policy demands, including banning child marriage.

JAG, the women's groups, child rights organisations, parents, teenagers, and children who had welcomed the National Strategic Plan to Address the Causes of Underage Marriage in Malaysia, share the same concerns with the Segambut MP and Women's March MY. This national plan is the first to have identified the social factors of child marriage such as poverty and lack of education rather than the usual argument relying on religious and customary practices - at the expense of the child's happiness, health and wellbeing.

Earlier this year, then Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail who is a doctor, explained that "underage marriage (has) a profound effect on the health of a teenager and there are studies that found that girls aged between 15 and 19 who are pregnant face a higher risk of death during pregnancy or birth". Last year, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development had compiled statistics on child marriage in Malaysia, indicating that from 2007 to 2017, 14,999 child marriages had taken place. Of this number, 10,000 cases involved Muslim children.

It only makes sense to raise these very important questions on national policy on a public platform such as Twitter given that members of parliament have yet to properly sit and debate on matters of national governance and policy. The last parliament sitting ended on December 5th 2019, more than six months ago. Since then, there has been a change in government, a national crisis where movement and freedom of association have been restricted, the economy impacted, and billions of ringgit have been spent. At such a time, it is crucial that MPs representing real Malaysian voters are given the space to articulate their concerns and participate by holding the current government accountable and answerable, as is their role in a democracy.

JAG would like to remind all stakeholders that it is every citizen's right to participate in the civic and political process, as is enshrined under Article 10 of the Federal Constitution which protects the Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association. Issues and policies that impact women's rights and health are national policies that deserve to have the same space for scrutiny, debate and action.

The order calling in YB Hannah Yeoh and the Women's March MY organisers for questioning with regards to her tweet is mind-boggling, but the fear it inspires is not. The weight of police authority and criminal investigations underline the force that is being used to intimidate women's political participation, specifically leaders of the women's movement.

JAG would also like impress upon all stakeholders that with the MCO, women are more vulnerable as many have lost their source of income, their homes or housing, and as such there is a greater need for their voices to be represented in parliament where their specific needs can be taken into account while formulating national policy moving forward. Spaces for women's voices must be made and more importantly, these spaces must be accessible to women.

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- Association of Women Lawyers (AWL)
- Pusat Sahabat Wanita Selangor (PSWS)
- Tenaganita
- KRYSS Network
- Sisters in Islam
- Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER)
- All Women's Action Society (AWAM)
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