

‘A tiger at home, a frog in public’: Women still underrepresented in leadership, says political analyst

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SARAWAK



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KUCHING (July 20): Women’s contributions to families, communities, and politics remain undervalued in leadership and governance structures, particularly within the Dayak community, said socio-political analyst Datuk Prof Dr Jayum Jawan.

Despite playing crucial roles in various spheres of life, women continue to face limited representation in national and state-level decision-making, he told

“While women form nearly half of Malaysia’s population and electorate, their representation in national and state-level governance continues to lag significantly behind men,” said Jayum, a Fellow of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia and Adjunct Professor at the Institute of Borneo Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas).

He cited data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), noting that as of early 2024, Malaysia’s estimated citizen population stood at around 31 million – 53 per cent male and 47 per cent female, excluding roughly three million foreigners.

“Women are essential in family life and society at large, yet their value is often not reflected in decision-making processes or political leadership.

“This contradicts the frequently-quoted proverb: ‘the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world’,” he added.

Jayum stressed that women constitute about half the voting population in most constituencies, making their support pivotal to any election outcome.

“Any political candidate who wins an election must acknowledge that women voters were equally responsible for their victory,” he said.

He likened the gap between women’s influence in the home and their limited public visibility to a Dayak saying: “Di rumah baka remaong, di tanah baka raong” (a tiger at home, a frog in public).

According to Jayum, entrenched cultural norms and patriarchal values continue to marginalise women from leadership roles, despite their vital contributions.

“While some communities have acknowledged women’s roles in politics and governance since the 1960s, others still lag behind,” he said.

He acknowledged that major parties such as Umno and MCA had previously promoted women to senior positions, naming figures like Tun Fatimah Hashim, Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, and Tan Sri Dr Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

“Tun Fatimah, for instance, made history as the first Malay woman minister and was part of the only husband-wife duo ever appointed to the Malaysian Cabinet,” he said.

Rafidah Aziz, widely dubbed Malaysia’s ‘Iron Lady’, was praised for her strong leadership style, likened to Britain’s Margaret Thatcher.

Umno, Jayum added, continues to elevate women to ministerial positions, such as current Information Chief Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said.

MCA, he noted, also appointed Datuk Seri Dr Ng Yen Yen as a full minister. However, he pointed out that no Indian women from MIC have reached such positions.

“DAP has had two women federal ministers to date -Theresa Kok and Hannah Yeoh – while PKR currently has two women ministers in the Madani Cabinet: Fahdlina Sidek and Zaleha Mustafa.

“GPS, only having Nancy Shukri of PBB holding a full ministerial position,” he said.

Overall, the Madani Cabinet comprises five female ministers from four parties – DAP (1), Umno (1), PKR (2), and PBB (1). Other coalition partners — PDP, PRS, Amanah, and GRS — have no female ministers.

At the Sarawak state level, PBB is the sole GPS component with a woman in the Cabinet – Dato Sri Fatimah Abdullah, Minister of Women, Early Childhood, and Community Wellbeing Development.

Of the 82 state assembly members, only five are women — four from PBB and one from DAP.

In Parliament, six women MPs represent Sarawak – four Malay/Melanau Muslims (PBB), one Chinese (DAP), and one Iban (PRS).

Jayum said while parties like PBB, Umno, and PKR show better female representation, Dayak-majority parties lag behind.

Since Malaysia's formation in 1963, no Dayak woman has ever held a full ministerial post at the state or federal level, he added.

He cited PRS MP Doris Brodie, who won the Sri Aman seat in 2022, as a missed opportunity.

Despite her experience – including two terms in the Senate and serving as Deputy Senate President – she was passed over for the two ministerial slots allocated to PRS, Jayum said.

“This is disappointing, especially given her experience. The decision to side-line Doris reflects the continuing gender imbalance in political appointments, particularly among the Dayak community,” he said.

He urged all communities to do more to recognise and elevate women in leadership, noting that national progress depends on equal participation from all members of society.