

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: BREAKING A NEW PATH FOR WOMEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OR BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality is a part of the UN's championed Sustainable Development Goal which reflects the global policy priority of bringing women to the table as decision-makers. The year 2021 has seen the highest record of women serving as the Heads of State and/or Government at and political representation at national parliaments. However, there seems to be a greater challenge for women to achieve equal political representation as COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in 2020 has slowed down women political progress at global level. Until April 2021, COVID-19 has resulted into more than six million casualties and many countries have resorted to take strict measures to contain the widespread of the virus especially prior to the administration of the vaccines. The strict measures taken by governments worldwide include border closures, extensive contact tracing, physical distancing, and restriction of movements. The pandemic is proven to be precarious not only to public health but also to democracy around the world as governments are given 'free pass' to silence protests, clamp down oppositions and critics as well as greater control over public movements by using COVID-19 management as a justification. This also has halted the progress made by women movements and political activists in championing women political representation. Malaysia is one of the countries that imposed long and strict COVID-19 related security and safety measures.

On top of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in 2020, Malaysia also faced another crisis in the form of political uncertainty as the *Pakatan Harapan* that won the historical 2018 election was toppled down by its own allies through a soft coup by Muhyiddin Yassin and his team. Shortly after his appointment as Malaysia's new prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin announced the strictest lockdown ever experienced by Malaysia which lasted until May 2020. This was followed by a series of lockdowns which lasted for almost two years before Malaysia officially announced that it entered the endemic phase in April 2022. With COVID-19 in the background, the country has experienced four state elections (Sabah, Sarawak, Melaka, and Johor) with three of them (Sabah, Melaka, and Johor) were due to the dissolution of state assemblies as the struggle for political power remain. The country also sees the changes of political leadership from Mahathir Mohammad (2018-2020) to Muhyiddin Yassin (2020-2021), and Ismail Sabri (2021-current).

The combination of political and health crises is potent to the progress of women political empowerment in Malaysia as it further slips away in Global Gender Gap Index's ranking in 2021 at 112th out of 156 countries measured. In 2020, Malaysia was at the 104th out of 153 countries. Despite scoring well in two out of four indicators used (educational attainment and health survival), Malaysia still falls behind for economic participation and opportunity (at 97th) and political empowerment (at 117th). According to the statistics produced by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, women representation in parliament is only at 10.8% which is lower than the global average of 21.8% and regional average of 18.4%. There have been various factors that hamper women's active participation in politics such as socio-cultural values, public perception, and economic constraints. One of the the most critical institution that

influences women's political participation is political parties and the state that act as gatekeepers to the democratic process in society. This paper seeks to analyse how COVID-19 is utilised by political institutions specifically the state and the political parties to embrace changes as it is a possible critical juncture that provides opportunities for the state and political parties to renegotiate their structures, values, and positions in society to accommodate women. To explore the effects of COVID-19 towards women political representation in the state institution and political process, this paper identifies two areas to be examined: 1) political representation in the four state elections that took place during COVID-19, 2) gendered changes in state structures due to political instability during COVID-19. The paper aims to utilise feminist institutionalism to analyse the gendered consequences of COVID-19 on women political representation by using data on political parties' selection of state electoral candidates and women representation in the cabinet and ministries at each point of political leadership's change as Malaysia has had three different prime ministers since 2018 to 2022. This paper extends to the growing studies on the impacts of gendered political institutions to female political representation using COVID-19 pandemic and political instability as the research setting. The results of this study will provide useful insights on the important factors that influence the utilisation of critical juncture either to break a new path or maintain the existing path-dependency of women's status in politics.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2020, the world was disrupted by the rapid spread of COVID-19 which originated from Hubei China and discovered in late 2019. COVID-19. By March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic and the governments around the world struggled to provide the best public health emergency response to contain the spread of the virus. The global pandemic which was the first and the largest in terms of scale in the modernized and globalized 21st century require multipronged approach to manage. Governments around the world resorted to different approaches to handle COVID-19 with many opted to introduce movement restrictions including lockdowns, quarantine requirements, mask mandates, business closures, and border shutdowns although they vary in terms of the degrees of the restriction policies (Hale et.al, 2020). The movement restrictions orders were proven to be effective in terms of containing the spread of the virus and prevent the already overwhelmed public health institutions from collapsing, yet the movement restrictions applied by at least 82 countries in the world have resulted into economic, social, and political crises. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that in 2020, the world's economic growth declined up to three percent due to volatile financial and capital markets due to the spread of COVID-19 and the movement restriction orders by governments around the world that had slowed down economic activities (Mofijur et.al, 2021). The United Nations highlighted the pandemic would have greater impacts on vulnerable groups around the world including the elderly, people with disabilities, youths, families, and the indigenous people (The UN, 2021).

International organizations also have warned that the pandemic would exacerbate inequalities at the global and domestic levels. Globally, COVID-19 has dire effects on developing and least developed countries as they struggle to provide additional financial support for COVID-19 responses, to widen their security net protection for affected households while facing drastic decline in their revenue due to economic restrictions and slow global economic activities (The

UN, 2020, B.Decerf et.al, 2021). At the domestic level, socio-economic inequalities widen as the pandemic as the less educated households, women, lower income groups, minorities were shown to experience more negative consequences of movement restrictions due to COVID-19 (Blundell et.al, 2020, Quantin and Tubet-Bitter, 2022). These inequalities further worsened due to existing social discrimination faced by marginalised groups as women, minority groups, lower income groups are more likely to face job losses due to COVID-19. Women also are more likely to bear additional household and family responsibilities due to the closure of educational institutions and care providers (The UN, 2020, Carli, 2020, Fortier, 2020, Power, 2020, Wolfe, Harknett, and Schneider, 2021). Despite the virus was found to have greater fatality rate on men than women (Gebhard et.al, 2020, Mukherjee and Pahan, 2021), scholars have documented that women are more affected in other aspects of life across different sectors due to COVID-19 (de Paz et.al, 2020, Alon et.al, 2020, Roesch et.al, 2020, Hupkau and Petrolongo, 2020, Ribarovska et.al, 2020, Fisher and Ryan, 2021).

COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND POLITICS

As the two years of the widespread of COVID-19 led many governments to adopt mobility restrictions measures, women participation in public space including political activities were also gravely affected as women voices were either missing or invisible from critical decision-making process (Priola and Pecis, 2020, Smith, 2020, van Daalen et.al, 2021) and access to critical resources to participate actively in political activities may diminish (Gatto and Thome, 2020). Furthermore, women were already politically underrepresented prior to the COVID-19 outbreak as the global average of female descriptive representation in legislature is only 24.3% in 2019 and female head of states and governments hover around 5-6% approximately (Inter Parliamentary Union, 2019). However scholars have argued that although COVID-19 brought disastrous impacts on women in other areas, female leadership has gain positive outlook due to the success of female leaders in managing COVID-19 more successfully compared to their male counterparts at all governmental levels (Coscieme et.al, 2020, Piazza and Diaz, 2020, Sergent and Stajkovic, 2020, Funk, 2020, Bruce et.al, 2021, Fisher and Ryan, 2021, Garikipati and Kambhampati, 2021, Maity and Barlaskar, 2022).

Some scholars criticized the highlight on political leaders' gender overlooked other crucial factors involved such as the existing wide and excellent health care coverage (Abrams, Fava, and Kuwahara, 2021) and data selection bias that led to overamplification on the success of female leaders in handling COVID-19 (Windsor, et.al, 2020). Other factors such as political ideologies, term limits (Baccini and Brodeur, 2020, Maak, Pless, and Wohlgezogen, 2021), political partisanship (Grossman et.al, 2020), and structures of political institutions (Greer et.al, 2020) have influence on governments' responses towards COVID-19. Despite that, studies have shown that female leaders offer different leadership style compared to men in which female leaders have been documented to use more compassionate languages and nonverbal communication styles that focus more on empathy and issues such as provision of welfare assistance in their speeches (Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz, 2020, Sara Dada et.al, 2021) which strengthen the female leaders authority during crisis as they leverage stereotypical feminine traits such as protective and caring to appear competent in handling COVID-19 compared to their male fellows (Johnson and Williams, 2020). Furthermore, research shows that countries with more female representatives in the legislature and industries with more female decision makers are more likely to consider gendered consequences of government and

organizational policies including COVID-19 related policies (Aldrich and Lotito, 2020, Hessami and de Fonseca, 2020, Brooks and Saad, 2020)

Although this led to women being viewed more favourably as alternative to seemingly failed male leadership in handling COVID-19, this does not translate into significantly higher political representation of women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). Female representation in the legislature 2021 still hovers around 25.5%-mark, a slight increase from 2019 (24.3%) while women position as head of state/government or speakers and deputy speakers also did not see significant shift. Despite that, governments and international organizations responses towards COVID-19 were found to be more gender inclusive compared to previous outbreaks such as Ebola and Zika (Tabbush and Friedman, 2020). Some scholars are also optimistic about the female political empowerment as they see the crisis as a critical juncture that can change the path dependency of political institution which previously often sideline women in political activities (Piazza and Diaz, 2020, S. Nanthini and Nair, 2020, Huang, 2021, Fisseha et.al, 2021, Hibbs, 2021)

POLITICAL CRISIS AMIDST COVID-19

The first COVID-19 case in Malaysia was formally recorded on 25th January 2020 and has since then recorded more than 4.5 million cases and approximately 36,000 fatalities (COVIDNOW in Malaysia, n.d.). As the nation struggles to deal with COVID-19, another crisis was brewing as the leadership succession plan from Mahathir Mohamad to Anwar Ibrahim after the much-celebrated 2018 general election victory failed to materialize. Pakatan Harapan's power struggle which saw the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad as the prime minister on 24th February, the collapse of Pakatan Harapan's government after only 22 months in power and the establishment of new government led by Muhyiddin Yassin on 1st March 2020 followed by Muhyiddin's resignation after 17 months in power on 16th August 2021 and Ismail Sabri was appointed as the new prime minister on 20th August 2020 The first Movement Control Order announced in March 2020 then continued to evolve to various forms and degrees of restrictions which saw the closure of all educational institutions from pre-school to university levels, the strict border control that prevent inter-state movements, and the announcement of State Emergency Order which saw the suspension of the parliament to contain the wide spread of COVID-19. The declaration of state emergency order by the government were heavily criticised by the opposition as it was seen as a political tactic to allow the unstable coalition led by Muhyiddin Yassin to remain as a government of the day (Palatino, 2021, Samsunahar, 2021, Syed Sopi, 2021) Consequently, Malaysia's political turmoil also saw a series of political events that have impacted Malaysian women political representation: 1) The collapse of three state governments namely Sabah, Melaka, and Johor which necessitates the state elections to be held during COVID-19. Apart from the three state elections held due, the state of Sarawak also held its long scheduled state election which was postponed due to introduction of strict movement control order by the federal government beginning 18th March 2020, 2) The change of premiership also resulted in the change in the political institution's structure including ruling coalition's dynamics and cabinet line-up and 3) Government's responses towards gender issues during the series of Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18th March 2020 to January 2022¹.

¹ To read more on the effects of Movement Control Order on democracy in Malaysia, please read [Tayeb and Hong](#) (2021)

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN MALAYSIA POST GE-14 (2018)

Prior to COVID-19 outbreak and the continuous political upheavals since the collapse of the 22 months Pakatan Harapan's government, Malaysian women political representation was already at a low point despite the heralded government's initiatives on women empowerment through its official women policy agency, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. Malaysian women face various obstacles to participate actively in politics especially as they often have less resources (i.e., financial, expertise, network) compared to men as well as the strong patron-clientele network that dominate Malaysian political setting. (Welsh, 2018). Apart from that, scholars identify that "social structures, cultural barriers and political institutions" become main obstacles for Malaysian women to participate in politics (Yeong, 2018, p.2). Despite the increasing gender agendas being included in political parties' manifestos during the 14th General Election in 2018, study found that the inclusion of gender related agendas in election manifestos by all political parties' coalitions did not translate into concrete gender policies post-election (Aminudin et.al, 2020).

The 2018 election which many expected to be the turning point for Malaysia as breaks the status quo of Barisan Nasional's domination proved to be less futile for women political inclusion. Despite 30% female political representation being one of the main agenda included in the Pakatan Harapan's manifesto, they failed to materialise once they gained their foothold in Putrajaya, the capital of administration of Malaysia. Despite the slight increases in the percentage of female political representation during Pakatan Harapan's short stint in Putrajaya, Malaysia continues its poor performance in gender empowerment and gender equality especially in the political domain (Izharuddin, 2019). Despite the small achievements made by women movements in achieving greater female political representation over the years, the intense competition between political parties due to rising popularity of the opposition parties have resulted into more focus given to women issue in their attempt to garner women's votes (Maznah Mohamad, 2018). The 2018 election which was deemed as one of the tightest elections ever in Malaysian history saw women political representation increased slightly compared to previous years. The number of female legislators in the parliament rose to 33 (14.4%), continuing the marginal increase of female descriptive representation in each election cycle. In 2013, there were only 24 female legislative members in the national parliament. Despite the attempt to downsize the cabinet, post-GE14 saw that the PH government form large ministerial line up with 50 ministers and deputy ministers in which 82% (41) of the ministers and deputy ministers are males and only 18% (9) are females which is a far outcry from the promised 30% female political representation promised in the PH election manifesto. Due to the lack of gender reform policies expected to be carried out by the Pakatan Harapan's government, in 2019, Malaysia continued to record lower (0.972) than average (0.981) Gender Development Index in comparison to other countries that belong in the same 'very high' human development category (The World Bank, 2021).

POLITICAL INSTITUTION AND WOMEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION DURING COVID-19

The optimism of higher women political inclusion with the victory of the Pakatan Harapan in 2018 slowly withered as Pakatan Harapan, shied-away from fulfilling its promise to have 30% female representation at least in the cabinet line-up. Furthermore, the fragile multiparty

coalition failed to withstand the pressure of entrenched ethnoreligious sentiments². The partnership between two main Malay political parties, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which was the dominant party of the incumbent ruling coalition, and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), an Islamist party were able to garner the support of the Malay-Muslim Malaysians who were dissatisfied with the Pakatan Harapan's government which was seen as dominated by the Chinese majority, Democratic Action Party (DAP) (Saat, 2019, Ufen, 2021). As COVID-19 outbreak began early 2020, the Pakatan Harapan's government was already in a fragile condition and Mahathir Mohamad's resignation on 24th February 2020 has led to the formation of a new coalition, Perikatan Nasional led by Muhyiddin Yassin who later sworn in as the new Prime Minister on 1st March 2020 which he was later succeeded by Ismail Sabri in August 2021.

The realignment of political coalition has led to unstable political condition amidst the pandemic and resulted into three unscheduled state elections and changes in country's political leadership. Amidst the crisis in which some may see opportunities for greater women political inclusion, Malaysian women seem to be left behind. The political coalitions went through major realignment process that saw the signing of MoU between the government and Pakatan Harapan to stabilize the political turbulence and refocus on the COVID-19 recovery efforts (Aziz, 2021). The move was seen as a progressive attempt. Despite the dynamic political events, there have been no significant changes to women representation in political process. This could be seen in three main aspects: 1) Political leadership, 2) Female representation in state elections (2020-2022), and 3) Government's responses towards gender issues during COVID-19. Furthermore, Malaysia further slips away in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index, ranking at 112th out of 156 countries measured (Global Gender Gap Report 2021, 2021). Despite scoring well in two out of four indicators used (educational attainment and health survival), Malaysia still falls behind for economic participation and opportunity (at 104th) and political empowerment (at 128th). According to the statistics produced by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, women representation in parliament is only at 10.8% which is lower than the global average of 21.8% and regional average of 18.4% (Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2020)

Political leadership

The Pakatan Harapan's fall led to the formation of new ruling coalition, Perikatan Nasional which comprised of Mahathir's own political party at the time, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), UMNO, PAS and several defected members from Anwar Ibrahim's political party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)³. The formation of a new government led by Muhyiddin Yassin did not went through the electoral process and based on negotiations, bargaining, and concessions made by elected members of parliament, hence, it was heavily criticised and branded as a 'backdoor government'. In the attempt of the new prime minister to consolidate his power in an equally fragmented coalition, his cabinet line-up also almost doubled up the size from the previous line-up, from 50 (25 ministers, 23 deputy ministers, to 70 (four senior

² The PH government was already facing continuous losses in a series of by-elections held prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. For additional reading, Yaakub, M. T. (2021). [The Battle of Three Political Regimes in Malaysia Prior and Post GE 14th: An Analysis of Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Harapan & The Formation of Perikatan Nasional \(PN\)](#). *International Journal of Politics, Publics Policy and Social Works*, 3 (8), 29-38.

³ Mahathir was later expelled from BERSATU in May 2020 and founded another political party, Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (PEJUANG) in August 2020.

ministers, 27 ministers, and 38 deputy ministers). In 2021, Ismail Sabri’s cabinet line up maintained mainly the composition he inherited from Muhyiddin Yassin’s government with no significant changes in terms of size and structures.

Table 1: Figures of female descriptive representation in ministerial positions.

Year/ Coalition	Female ministers	Female deputy ministers	Total
PH (2018-2020)	5	4	18%
PN (2020-2021)	5	4	12.9%
BN (2021-current)	5	4	12.9%

Source: Analysed based on information on Prime Minister’s Office website

The political instability in Malaysian politics since 2018 has seen that women continue to be marginalized in political leadership positions especially in ministerial positions. As the 2018 marked historic victory for the opposition coalition, it was also formed on a fragile alliance between political parties that are fundamentally different. The lack of cohesiveness of the coalition further pushed female political leaders down the rank of importance of the parties as the ministerial positions are seen as bargaining tool for the prime minister to maintain support to their leadership especially in a precarious coalition pact. As seen in Table 1, the number of female ministers and deputy ministers remain the same throughout the three different governments in the past five years. However, the percentage slightly differ with the percentage of female ministers and deputy ministers were reduced from 18% which is still a far cry from the 30% promised by Pakatan Harapan in their election manifesto in 2018 to 12.9% when the new government led by Muhyiddin Yassin was formed in 2020 and remained the same in Ismail Sabri’s government in 2021. As the government was established on shaky ground due to fragile coalition, the cabinet line-up in the subsequent governments after the fall of Pakatan Harapan increased in size to accommodate different political actors, despite the increase in cabinet size, women representation in ministerial positions remain stagnant and unchanged resulted in reduced percentage of women in ministerial positions. This reflects the weak women voices in their political parties and the lack of spaces for them to voice out their demands and take part actively during critical times.

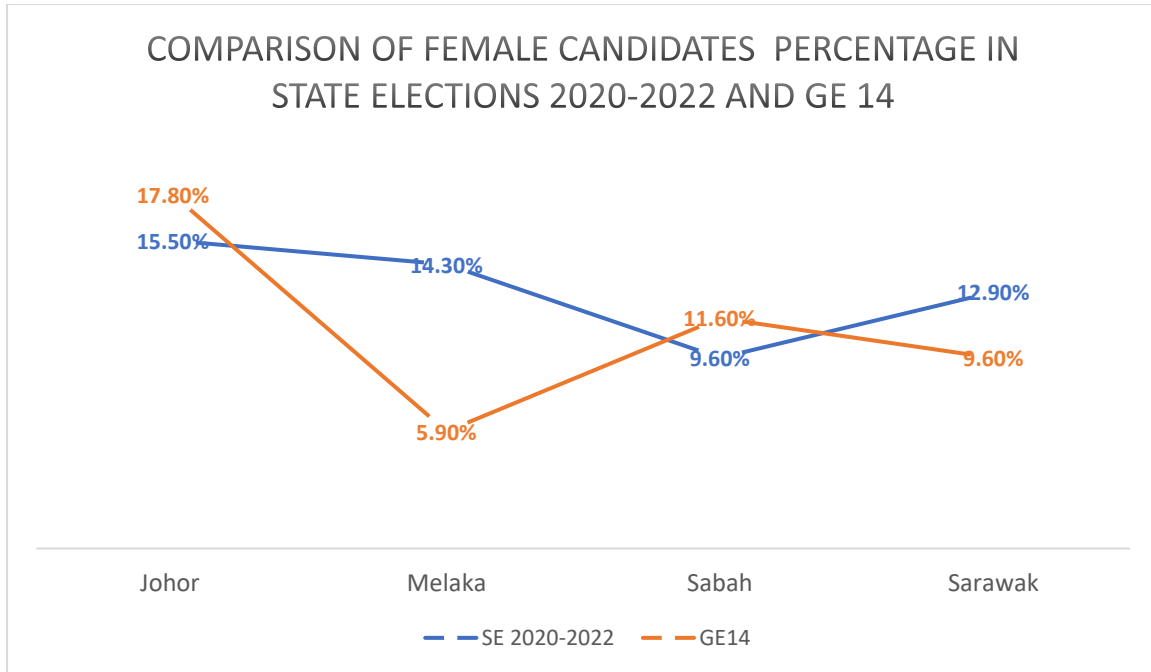
Political representation in state elections

As the political instability led to unscheduled state elections, this paper examines female representation as candidates as well as in the state legislative assemblies. The first state election was the Sabah state election in September 2020. The change of federal level government led to political instability at the state level as well. Termed by some as the “frog election” as the state election was the result of politicians changing alliances (Siti Kasim, 2020, Suffian, 2020, Ignatius, 2020), the decision to hold the state election was criticised by many as it was during the peak of COVID-19 outbreak. However, as it was the first state election held after the change of government in March 2020, it was seen as a litmus test to Muhyiddin Yassin government’s legitimacy. It was followed by the Melaka state election in November 2021, Sarawak in December 2021, and the Johor state election in March 2022. Except for Sarawak state election which was postponed due to the state of emergency declaration⁴, all the other state elections

⁴ Sarawak has a different state election cycle since the 1978 General Election as the state election was only held in 1979.

were unscheduled. The overall trend of state elections saw the marginal increase of female candidacies. This may be contributed to the increasing number of political parties that contest in the elections as Malaysia's politics become highly fragmented as new political parties emerge because of the breakup of Pakatan Harapan and Perikatan Nasional⁵.

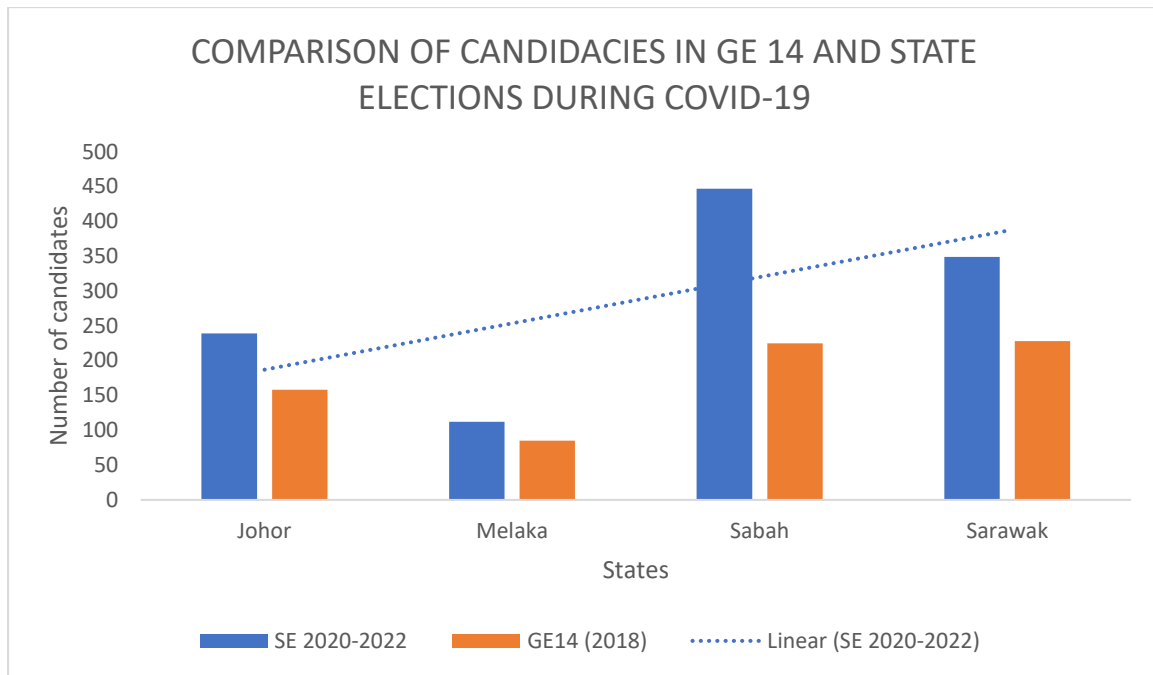
DIAGRAM 1: COMPARISON OF FEMALE CANDIDATES' PERCENTAGE IN STATE ELECTIONS 2020-2022 AND GE 14



Source: Tabulated based on data obtained from the EC website (Portal Rasmi Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (SPR), n.d.)

⁵ [New political parties that emerge after 2020 include PEJUANG, Malaysian United Democratic Alliance \(MUDA\), Parti Bangsa Malaysia \(PBM\), and Parti Kuasa Rakyat \(PKR\).](#)

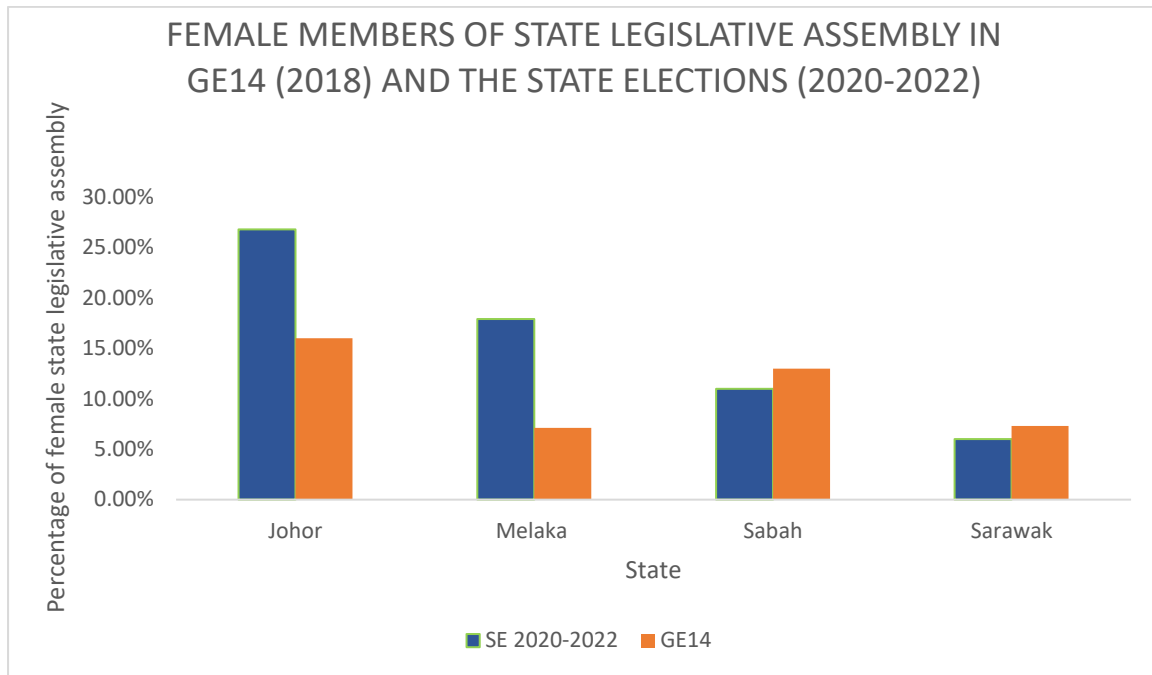
DIAGRAM 2: CANDIDACIES IN STATE ELECTIONS IN 2018 AND 2020-2022.



Source: Tabulated based on data obtained from the EC website (Portal Rasmi Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (SPR), n.d.)

It is observed that there is a mixed pattern of female representation in the state elections held during COVID-19 as there is an increase of female candidates in Melaka (14.3%) and Sarawak (12.9%) while Sabah (9.6%) and Johor (15.5%) saw reduced percentage of female candidates. The increase of female candidates in Melaka and Sarawak is in line with the overall rise in the number of candidates contesting in all state elections with Sabah recorded the highest rise (66%) in electoral candidacies followed by Sarawak (42%), Johor (41%), and Melaka (27%) compared to 2018 General. The rise of female candidates is still considered as low compared to the overall trend in all four state elections as it is below 20%.

DIAGRAM 3: FEMALE MEMBERS OF STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY IN GE14 (2018) AND THE STATE ELECTIONS (2020-2022)



Source: Tabulated based on data obtained from the EC website (Portal Rasmi Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (SPR), n.d.)

This study finds that the number of female candidates does not correlate with the number of seats in the state legislative assembly occupied by women. This is because despite the reduction in percentage of female candidates contesting in 2022 Johor state election, it has the highest number of winners (26.8%) that make them eligible to be in the state legislative assembly compared to GE 14 (16%). Sabah⁶ and Sarawak on the other hand saw marginal rise in the number of female candidates in the 2020 and 2021 state elections but saw reduced female representatives in the state legislative assembly (11% and 6% respectively) compared to 2018 (13%) and 2016 (7.3%). Melaka is the only state that records correlation between the number of female candidates and the number of female state legislative assembly members in the 2021 state election. Melaka records more than 50% increase of female state legislative assembly (18%) compared to 2018 (7.1%). It is worth noted that Sabah has 13 new constituencies in the 2020 election compared only 60 seats in the 2018 election⁷.

GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE TOWARDS GENDER ISSUES DURING COVID-19

The changes in political institutional structures during the outbreak of COVID-19 due to unstable political climate have impacts on government’s responses towards gender issues that arose during the peak of COVID-19 outbreak. This study measured three government’s responses on gender issues namely: 1) The suspension of government’s careline “*Talian Kasih*” that is specifically established to cater for gender related problems such as domestic violence,

⁶ In November 2020, Bugaya State Legislative Assembly member, Manis Muka Mohd Darah passed away and until June 2022, there has yet to be a by-election for her seat.

⁷ The new seats are Bengkoka, Mangaris, Pintasana, Pantai Dalit, Darau, Tanjung Dumpil, Dambai, Tulid, Telupid, Sungai Manila, Lamag, Segama and Kukusan. The amendment was passed by the Sabah state legislative assembly in 2016 and the motion was approved by the Parliament in July 2019.

child abuse et cetera, 2) The promotion of sexist infographics by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development during the MCO period, and 3) The renouncement of the increase of minimum age to marry from 16 to 18 years.

Malaysia's government has established a specific Women Policy Agency (WPA) that is specifically to cater for women issues in 2001, namely the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. However, the Ministry has disproportionate responsibilities as it also must cater to children, people with disabilities, the elderly, and societal issues. This has posed constraints to the ministry's scarce resources to address women issues especially women political empowerment issues effectively (Aminudin, 2018). During the short stint of PH government, the ministry was helmed by the Deputy Prime Minister, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and her deputy minister, Hannah Yeoh in which the ministry proposed several structural changes such as the introduction of Suri Incentive scheme (i-Suri) which allows housewives to open a retirement investment account with the national Employees Provident Fund (EPF) in which the government would contribute RM40⁸ monthly to the registered housewives (Vijaindren et.al, 2018). Apart from that, there were also proposal to amend and introduce legal mechanisms to better protect women and children's rights such as the proposal to establish Sexual Harassment Protection Act for Members of Parliament and the preparation for Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill (Department of Women's Development, 2019, 33 Program Akan Dilaksana KPWKM Tahun Ini, 2020).

However, as the PN government took over in 2020, there had been changes in the ministry's structure. The then newly appointed minister, Rina Harun, and her deputy minister, Siti Zailah were seen to be less constructive in engaging with gender related issues especially as their appointments were made during the onset of the MCO in March 2020. The weak response of the ministry has led to the civil society and grassroots movement to be more actively involved in providing support to vulnerable groups (Bernama, 2020, Tayeb and Hong, 2021). The incompetency of the ministry in responding to the gender issues especially during the MCO were observed as the ministry decided to suspend the careline under the ministry that is specifically established to help the ministry's focus groups including women to share their concerns and issues (Tan, 2020). Although this may be contributed to the lack of experience of both minister and deputy minister as they are relatively new in administrative positions, it does reflect the lack of attention given to the needs of women during crisis. As the careline was later resumed after two weeks of being suspended, the careline recorded an increase of up to 57% of cases received (Women's Aid Organisation, 2020). After the blunder on the careline suspension, the Ministry again came under criticism for posting sexist infographics on its social media platform which was meant to promote marital harmony during the MCO. The minister uploaded several infographics which includes advising women to talk to their spouses using "Doraemon" voice, an originally Japanese anime character which is often associated with being cute. Apart from that, the infographic also advises women not to nag their husbands and to put on make up at home and dolled themselves up (REUTERS, 2020). This is a big shift from the previous administration which is deemed to be more focused on real structural changes to improve women's status and condition in the society and deemed to uncover disturbing deep-seated sexism in Malaysian Women Policy Agency.

⁸ RM40 is approximately \$10 USD in 2022.

The MWFCDC also has renounced its previous initiative during the PH government to increase the minimum age to marry from 16 to 18 years old. In 2018, the ministry announced a National Strategic Plan to Address the Causes of Underage Marriage as part of its efforts to increase the minimum age to marry for women from 16 to 18 years old (Reduan and Abdul Karim, 2018, Abas, 2020). The issue received public attention after media reports on an 11-year-old girl married to a 41-year-old man. The proposed amendment, however, did not materialise as the ministry changed its stance on underage marriage. The Deputy Minister, Siti Zailah cited religious reasons for not continuing with the proposed amendment in line with her party's stance although underage marriage affects both Muslims and non-Muslims girls (Abdullah, 2020). The Religious Minister also issued a statement to maintain the current minimum age for Muslims women to marry which is 16 (Zulkarnain and David, 2021). In March 2022, the Minister, Rina Harun announced that the government does not have plan to ban underage marriage, but the government remains committed to the issue (Rosli, 2022). This lack of certainty of government responses regarding the matter illustrates the flippant attitudes of the ministers in charge of women issues and therefore, result in lacklustre performance of the ministry in gender related issues especially during COVID-19.

PUBLIC TRUST ON GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF GENDER ISSUES DURING COVID-19

Despite the political turbulence and the introduction of rigid restriction of movement orders, the public initially hold positive outlook towards the government's response in managing COVID-19 (Aminudin et.al, 2020). The same cannot be said towards government's responses towards gender issues as the pandemic exacerbate existing gender inequalities in Malaysian society. The MWFCDC has received backlash from its own coalition partners, opposition leaders, civil society and members of the public for its suspension of the government's careline (Indramalar, 2020, Tan, 2020). The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) even urged the government to be more proactive to protect the vulnerable groups during critical period by being more accessible instead of restricting access to government's resources (Malay Mail, 2021). The public outcry over the ministry's decision led to the lift of the careline suspension after two weeks of the first phase of MCO (Chin, 2020). The Ministry's sexist infographics also were heavily criticised by the public and civil society mainly using social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to express their dissatisfaction with the ministry's handling of the issue (Reuters, 2020, Rozaidee, 2020) which led the ministry to issue a public apology yet alluding the infographics were initially well-intended (Solhi, 2020, Jayamanogaran, 2020). The civil society and the opposition parties also condemn the government's lackadaisical attitude towards gender issues and there have been strong calls for the government to take strong stance on gender issues as COVID-19 further widen the gender gap in the society (Malaysiakini, 2021, Malek, 2022). The government's refusal to address the structural gender inequalities in the society including the underage marriage issue will have negative consequences in the long run as studies have shown that underage marriage affects boys and girls in terms of their education, health and well-being, economic opportunities and expose them to more vulnerabilities (Hin, 2017). The lack of trust from the public in government's ability to manage gender issues is also due to leadership incompetency of the minister and deputy minister tasked to manage women issues. Both personalities are often embroiled in controversies and deemed by the public to be unsuitable to helm the ministry as they do not have strong positions regarding gender issues or hold ideology that contradict the

nature of the ministry. For example, the deputy minister was embroiled in controversy for her marital advice video which includes advising husbands to resort to physical punishment for wives as a mean to educate and guide the wives (Xian, 2022) and the minister, was seen as inept in dealing with a high-profile abuse case involving a girl with disability and unregistered and unlicensed foster care linked to prominent politicians and socialites in Malaysia (The Vibes, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has seen critical times in the recent years as it entangles with trifold crisis; political, health, and economic. As the whole country is struggling to overcome one of the biggest challenges in a century, women continue to be marginalized despite the crises provided opportunities for gender actors to manoeuvre new spaces created by the pandemic. Despite that, due to the lack of political opportunities presented to women, their voices continue to be absent or weak in decision-making processes despite the unfolding political events and turns that they are not able to grab the opportunities as the political space is occupied by experienced, old men who have more resources at hands compared to the women. Despite the slight increase of women's representation in political process, namely the state elections during COVID-19, women are severely underrepresented in Malaysian political institutions especially with fragile coalition and political uncertainties. Women are given the same space while men are given more platforms to participate as their loyalties and collegiality are more needed by the top political leaders compared to women politicians. The experience of Malaysian women during COVID-19 also has shown that descriptive representation of female political leaders does not necessarily translate into gender sensitive policies as it can result in the opposite direction. There is a need to move beyond political partisan sentiments for women issues to be given adequate attention by the policymakers and the gender actors should strike the iron while it is still hot, given the political uncertainty should enable them to change and create new path to be taken by the political institutions.

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