



**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY (IWD) FORUM 2023:  
GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN MALAYSIA MADANI**

**Wednesday, 8 March 2023**

**9.00am – 12.30pm**

**Regent Auditorium, Asian International Arbitration Centre, Bangunan Sulaiman, Jalan  
Sultan Hishamuddin, 50000, Kuala Lumpur**

**Report**

In conjunction with the IWD 2023, 8 March 2023, the United Nations (UN) in Malaysia and the National Council of Women's Organisations, Malaysia (NCWO) held a forum on *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Malaysia Madani*, moderated by TV host, Ms. Sheahnee Iman Lee.

The Forum commenced with remarks by YBhg. Prof. Emerita Tan Sri Dato' Sri Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hassan Shahabudin, President, National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO) and Ms. Karima El Korri, UN Resident Coordinator for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, and the official video message by Mr. António Guterres, UN Secretary-General.

The first panel took stock and reviewed enabling environments needed to advance the rights of women and girls in Malaysia by focusing on the legal and institutional frameworks and governance mechanisms as well as the social norms that need to be addressed and the role that civil society can play to overcome barriers for the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment in Malaysia. The keynote speaker was YB Azalina Othman Said, Minister for Law Reforms & Institutional Governance, and the four panelists were Ms Honey Tan, human rights lawyer, Maria Chin Abdullah, former MP and Bersih 2.0 chairperson, Ms Nurhuda Ramli, programme officer, outreach and empowerment Sisters In Islam, and Ms Izzana Salleh, Global President and Asia Director Project Girls for Girls.

The second panel discussed the need and the role of digital inclusion in accelerating gender equality and women's empowerment in Malaysia, in line with the IWD 2023, 8 March theme of "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality". The panel focused on digital inclusion to support women's economic empowerment and female labour force participation, leveraging social media for political influence and leadership to support gender equality and women's empowerment, and mobilising young women in ensuring an inclusive society where no one is left behind. The keynote speaker was YB Fahmi Fadzil, Minister of Communications and Multimedia and the three panelists were Ms. Nadira Yusoff, CEO, Kiddocare, Ms. Qyira Yusri, Special Adviser to European Commission, Undi18, and YB Amira Aisya Abd Aziz, MUDA member of Johor State Assembly.

**Outcomes**

The forum emphasised the need to ensure that strategies and measures are proactively and continuously taken to compensate for women's historical and social disadvantages and to ensure that both men and women operate on a level playing field.

- A. With regards to laws and governance, much has been achieved since the ratification of CEDAW, establishment of a Ministry for Women, Family and Community Development and the passing of the Anti Sexual Harassment Act. However more legal reforms in terms of substance, structure and context need to be done to lay the foundation for a humane economy, empowering women and protecting the vulnerable. Among the actions that need to be prioritized are:
1. Alleviation of the pervasive patriarchal mindset, limiting beliefs and conservatism as well as cultural norms affecting women's public and private lives, manifested for example in the opposition to the amendment of the Federal Constitution to allow women to pass automatic citizenship to their children born overseas regardless of whom they choose to marry.
  2. Article 5A of CEDAW defines governments' duty to modify people's behaviour and change perceptions that need to be operationalised through gender sensitizing awareness programmes and training among legislators, policymakers, right down to frontline workers and media personnel to provide them with gender-sensitive perspectives and courage to speak against conservatism; and by harnessing public support through the engagement of all stakeholders, particularly NGOs, civil society and religious leaders to make clear the stand that gender equality is not negotiable.
  3. The DNA Identification Act 2009 should be amended to compel an adult to give non-invasive samples for paternity tests, thus allowing a child to get compensation if paternity is proven. Similarly, the issue of marital rape needs to be recognised as a crime, which can be easily done through the removal of the exception in the Penal Code.
  4. Enact a comprehensive Anti Discrimination Act that goes beyond gender including addressing intersectionality, and establish a Commission for Gender Equality to enable constitutional guarantees for claims between individuals and also with the private sector.
  5. Re-activate the Parliamentary Select Committee on Gender Equality and establish a Cabinet Committee to strengthen governance and to oversee all ministerial programmes leading to empowerment and equality for women and girls; and to review the Malaysia Madani vision to include non-discrimination and equality as a pillar.
  6. Institutionalise education and training on gender equality and non-discrimination for law practitioners as well as young people through education in schools.
  7. Establish strong support systems for mentoring (including reverse mentoring) and "inpowering" training for young women to instill greater confidence and provide technical skills such as negotiation and public speaking. Encouragement and financial support should be given to NGOs providing support systems and to cross collaboration efforts.
- B. With regards to digital inclusion, it is acknowledged that the advancement of transformative technology and digital education offer immense opportunities in addressing development and humanitarian challenges faced by women and girls, to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although nothing beats face to face communication, social media allows communication anytime, anyplace. It is a leveler in the cyber public space and its democratisation enables citizens to air grievances, show support, coalesce and mobilise around ideas that effect changes in society. However, one must also be aware of the flipside of social media such as fake news, engineering of consent, cyber-trooping, and proliferation of scam tactics. Bringing women and other marginalized groups into technology results in more creative solutions and has greater potential for innovations

that meet women's needs and promote gender equality. Among actions that need to be promoted are:

1. Strong gender focal points and awarding of grants based on sex and age disaggregated data to ensure that target beneficiaries are reached.
2. Progressive policies and structures in various organisations (example parliamentary constituencies) to ensure the engagement and participation of young women in the hierarchy and empowerment programmes (health, entrepreneurship, literacy, public speaking etc.).
3. Digital platforms that enable women to remain in the workforce by connecting them with affordable and quality childcare services in safe environments, and that facilitate technology-enabled professional growth with better protection, social safety nets and safe working environments.
4. Better public-private sector collaboration is required to embrace innovation, provide incentives and upscale services using readily available data to develop policies and solutions to help working women.
5. Leveraging social media and on-line inclusivity programmes to inform people of their rights and to petition for change; providing digital devices to improve the political participation of young women to about 50 percent; a good example is UNDI18, a student-led movement, which successfully launched the campaign for Parliament to reduce the age of voting to 18; another example is Family Frontiers which campaigned for equal rights to confer citizenship on children born overseas to Malaysian mothers married to foreigners.
6. Embracing digital technology as a tool for political campaigns (e.g. TikTok and Instagram) to spread political messages and information (such as where to get relief and assistance) and to encourage voting, especially among the many voters living outside their constituencies. Townhalls are increasingly only attracting those above 60 years.
7. Ensuring online safety by addressing gender based violence and digital threats against those who speak up openly in the public space by enacting the Anti Stalking Bill; providing digital devices to facilitate 2-way engagement; online digital literacy classes; and STEM education from an early age; as well as enhancing video-making and other digital skills.

The forum ended with closing remarks delivered by Dr Asa Torkelsson, UNFPA Representative for Malaysia.