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Equal terms

By PATSY KAM

Half the Malaysian electorate is made up of women, therefore gender issues should be a main focus of the next batch of elected representatives.

A BRIEF survey by the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) has shown that the percentage of women candidates in the 12th general election is only 8.2% (128 candidates) of the total 1,568 seats contested – a far cry from the Government's target of ensuring at least 30% women in decision-making positions.

While there is an overall increase in the number of women candidates, the 2.2% increase is minimal (compared to 6% in 2004 and 8.2% in 2008).

JAG is also disappointed that women candidates have been pitted against one another (for example, the Barisan Nasional's Carol Chew takes on Teresa Kok of the DAP for the Seputeh parliamentary seat). This defeats the objective of getting more women into politics. Political parties should put more women in party stronghold seats if they are serious about having women in decision-making positions, says JAG.

Interestingly, there are significantly more women PAS candidates this time, from only nine in 2004 to 15 candidates – an increase of 40%. Seven women are contesting parliamentary seats this time, compared to only one in the last elections.

Numbers are not the only effective indicators, says JAG. Participation of women has to move towards a qualitative transformation of women in shaping national decision-making processes.

JAG, formerly known as the Joint Action Group against Violence against Women (JAG-VAW), was set up in 1985 by an ad-hoc coalition of women activists and non-governmental organisations. The organisation consists of Empower (Pusat Janadaya); All Women's Action Society (Awam); Women's Aid Organisation (WAO); Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Penang; and Sisters In Islam (SIS).

Earlier this year, JAG called on the Government to take immediate steps to bridge the gender gap. The recommendations included:

- To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women to eliminate prejudices, sexist conduct, customary, and all other malpractices.
- To achieve the 30% minimum target set for women, including in the public sector, executive, legislative and the judicial arms of Government by 2015.
- To implement all the commitments made and develop an effective monitoring system to evaluate the success of government policies and programmes to advance the status of women.

- To amend all existing laws that discriminate against women and ensure all new laws adhere to the principles of justice and equality, including all laws made in the name of Islam, as well as a Sexual Harassment Act and a Gender Discrimination Act.



Meanwhile, women's organisations voice their concerns and what they expect of the new Government:

Loh Cheng Kooi, Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Penang

“The level of violence against women, such as snatch thefts and sexual crimes like rape and child sexual abuse, has increased. Malaysians should vote for politicians who are honest, trustworthy and gender sensitive.

“When elected, politicians should *kotakan kata* (keep their promises) and ensure that women are recognised as equal, respectful citizens as men. How long more do women have to suffer from poor legislation on sexual harassment, domestic violence and discriminatory laws like the foreign spouse issue?”

Ivy Josiah, Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

“It is our hope that voters go for representatives who not only believe in gender equality but will also ensure laws and policies that promote and protect women are implemented properly with the appropriate budgetary allocations. What is prosperity and development if the rights of women within the family are not upheld by all agencies?

“It is also significant that election day falls on March 8, which coincides with International Women's Day. Voters should reject sexist MPs and demand a parliament that is respectful to women.”

Honey Tan, All Women's Action Society (Awam)

“The status of women dropped 20 places in the Global Gender Gap Index (which measures economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, education attainment and health and survival) compared to last year. The latest statistics show that women make up only 12% of directors in government-linked companies; 22% of professors in public universities; 9.4% of Cabinet members; 29% of senators; 6.9% of state assembly representatives and 12.5% of local councillors.



“We want MPs to be conscious of social justice issues. The needs and aspirations of their constituencies come first – not the political party to which they belong. When it comes to passing laws, they must explain the nature and effect of the laws they propose to pass, answer all the questions asked and deal with the reservations raised by their constituents.”

Toni Kasim, Women's Candidacy Initiative

“The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) was ratified in 1995 but Malaysia has yet to remove the reservations on it.



“It’s also disappointing that Umno is fielding so few women. Despite campaigning for the Sexual Harassment Act, nothing much has come out of it.

“The quality of MPs last year was very poor especially when you consider the kind of language against women. How then can they help in women’s rights if they don’t understand the issues and gender discrimination in the first place?”

Zainah Anwar, Sisters In Islam

“New MPs should amend all laws that discriminate against women. Muslim women should be treated as equals in this century and not left behind our non-Muslim sisters who seem to be making more progress and have more rights (for example, child guardianship/custody and inheritance laws). There are still no women syariah court judges, which is a paradox when you consider the fact that the majority of students taking up Islamic studies are women.



“Islam upholds equality and justice. We expect more men and women candidates of substance, who will take their roles seriously and not tolerate sexist remarks.”