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# Are Women Ready to Lead?

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*In a world where Sheryl Sandberg and Hilary Clinton regularly steal headlines, it's easy to think that the world has become a more egalitarian place for women. Not so, says Marina Mahathir.*

“The numbers indicate that women leaders are still underrepresented in both politics and business,” the Malaysian writer and advocate for women’s rights told Perspectives@SMU on the sidelines of the Singapore Women’s Congress 2013 held here recently.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, only 20 percent of parliamentarians worldwide are women. Singapore is above the global average at 24 percent, but in many other Asian countries, women’s representation is far lower than average. In Malaysia, Marina’s own country, only 10 percent of Parliament consists of women.

In the workplace, the pattern is the same, says Marina. While more women are visible in the lower rungs of companies than in the past, very few make it to the top. In the U.S., only 16.6 percent of Board seats go to women. In Asia, this figure is much lower. Hong Kong, which has the highest percentage of women on boards, only has 9 percent.

## Do the numbers matter?

Marina says that these numbers mean something. It is not enough for women to participate in the corporate sector and in public life. If women are not leaders in these spheres, they cannot influence the laws and policies that directly impact women's lives.

"Having a minority of women in elected office relegates women's issues to a minority issue rather than the concerns of half the population," says Marina. "Small wonder then that more 'manly' issues are passed faster and with less debate than more 'feminine' issues such as the need to compel workplaces to have creches for children or for longer maternity leave."

Marina also points out that many women who are elected into high office do not leverage their power to help other women. "There have been several women heads of government in Asian countries but none have shone as exemplary national leaders and most have done very little for women. In fact, often they are the only women in their Cabinets."

The fact that so few women are elected to top political positions means that their power is fragile and tenuous. As such, these women tend not to want to rock the boat in order to protect their positions. This explains the tendency of women politicians to abandon their female constituency when they get into office.

## The right kind of women

If it is not enough simply to elect women into leadership positions, then what should we do? Marina believes that society must choose women leaders who are willing to make difficult decisions that may be out of step with their predominantly male party members. Women activists, who are already used to facing adverse reactions from society including reprisals such as threats, are the right kind of women to elect.

In politics, women leaders tend to be relegated to women's wings that are seen as secondary and tangential to the main goal of running the country. "As long as political parties keep their women members in playpens known as 'wings', there will be no change in their status," says Marina. Women from activist backgrounds, who have devoted time to empowering women and confronting inequality, understand that women's rights are a central concern. They can bring this mindset into their political positions and break through the "playpen" mentality.

But apart from electing women activists, Marina says that we should change our mindset by recognising and supporting other female political actors, those in women's movements and other movements calling for change. "We should dispense with the argument that the only way to make a difference is to stand for elections. More and more, we can see that to do so can be a means of co-opting women activists and diluting feminist messages into much more generalised tokenistic ones about equality."

So are women ready to lead? According to Marina, they are but they require the right conditions to make successful leaders. Increasing the ratio of women to men in top positions will go some way to making it easier for women to lead. The most important thing to do is to support the right kind of women, those who are willing to take risks with their power to fight for other women.