

## Capable in her own right

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*Women will determine the outcome of the next general election. Nurul Izzah Anwar shares with The Rocket's **Chung Hosanna** why PR female lawmakers matter and how they decide differently from their male counterparts.*



[1]Lembah Pantai MP Nurul Izzah Anwar, better known as Izzah, is part of a new breed of female politicians who are fast changing the landscape of our Parliament. Young and savvy, her charm, wit and photogenic looks make her a media darling and crowd puller. This former skateboarder has come a long way since stepping out of the shadow of her famous father. She is now Vice President of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and an emerging leader in her own right.

Izzah believes that Pakatan Rakyat (PR) has evolved faster than Barisan Nasional (BN) in terms of meeting the changing needs of women in a persistently patriarchal environment. She attributes this to there not being a need to “kowtow to hierarchy” in PR parties as compared to BN parties. “When existing norms and values are cemented and institutionalized –like is the case in BN – it becomes challenging for new ideas to emerge,” she says.

Alluding to the entrenched “glass ceiling”, Izzah narrates an incident that occurred when the idea to form a Parliamentary Women’s caucus was first mooted in 2008 by Nancy Shukri, the BN MP for Batang Sadong. Despite being an idea raised by UMNO itself, Izzah Izzah says she was shocked that the UMNO female MPs were hesitant to join the caucus because they “needed to check” with the party leadership first.

“That is not even in Pakatan Rakyat’s dictionary,” she says. Calling the caucus “a game-changer”, Izzah suggests that for important issues such as these, an MP should decide based on conscience and not depend on party directives. At the very least, one would be excited to pursue it as a goal and attempt to convince the party leadership of its significance.

Eventually, the caucus got off the ground, although Izzah feels it should have been upgraded to the status of a Parliamentary Select Committee instead. Since a caucus depends on the financial assistance and approval of the minister in charge, the Caucus on Women’s Affairs is constantly “at the mercy of” its overseer Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, she says.

“In BN’s mind, there is already an existing Ministry for Women, Family and Community development, hence there is no necessity to create a select committee for women’s issues,” Izzah explains.

She says this reveals a structural issue with the ruling coalition, proven by BN’s insistence that select committees are not prioritized and not allowed to thrive in our parliamentary democracy.

“In the Parliamentary Women’s Caucus, PKR pushed very hard for the amendment of 60 days maternity leave to 90 days. I remember the answer given by (Minister for Women’s Development) Shahrizat was that according to a poll done by the Ministry, many women prefer to go back to work quickly instead of taking long leave,” she recalls.

Izzah criticizes this view as archaic and backward, saying that as a mother twice over, she understands how valuable time spent with a newborn is to a mother. “Heck, you carried the baby for nine months, you just want to spend as much time with your child as you can.”

“Coming from the Minister, it speaks volumes about how the ruling coalition views women.” Izzah hits out at the BN mentality that women have to be “thankful” to BN because it has given them so much, instead of the other way round.

### **The Minister is not doing enough**

She begs to differ, saying that the Women, Family, and Community Development Ministry is not enough to address the needs of the fairer sex. For instance, Talian Nur is not equipped to handle sensitive and delicate issues involving child victims. There was an instance where Izzah contacted Rumah Nur on behalf of an incest victim and was advised to call the police instead.

“The staff on the line told me, we don’t do such things, we only deal with free mammograms and pap smears. I mean, seriously...” she says.

Izzah says that the Ministry should be further emphasized and its budget should be increased accordingly to match its importance. Currently, there is a shortage of Social Welfare Department (JKM) officials and this compromises the standard of care given to JKM chargees, sometimes causing unintended accidents. Recently an 18 month old child fell and broke his arm at a ministry shelter. There are other cases, all of which could be avoided.

The overstretched JKM officials are also prone to human error or burdened with backlog. Ultimately, it is the aid recipients who will get substandard care. There have been cases where the welfare aid is 3 months’ late. There are also instances where the recipients are treated disrespectfully, even bordering on verbal abuse by JKM officials.

Izzah believes that this is due to the current system that has a mindset of giving handouts to the poor, who are regarded as a burden on the economy. She believes that this system is inefficient and will not empower the recipients in the long run with skills to uplift their economic standard.



[2] Women who are poor are often vulnerable and merely giving cash aid will not solve their problems in the long term. Izzah says programs such as the NGO-initiated “My Kasih” program are better designed to give a hand up, and not handouts to needy participants.

My Kasih is funded by corporate sponsors and gives poor households credit points in the recipient’s MyKad, which can be swiped to purchase groceries without the need for cash to change hands. The program which lasts for a year, imposes certain conditions on the recipients including: children of the household must attend school and the family must go through Bank Negara financial literacy training. (details at [www.mykasih.com.my](http://www.mykasih.com.my))

Izzah questions why such a valuable and successful program has yet to be adopted by the Ministry for nationwide implementation.

### **PR to bring change for women**

PR’s Alternative Budget 2011 proposes to give a “homemaker’s allowance” directly to women from lower income families, since women know the needs of their children best. Homemakers whose spouses earn RM18,000 a year or less and have at least one child would also be given RM1,000 yearly. PR makes it a priority to empower women.

PR also suggests that the Women Affairs Ministry should undertake the national census, because it would benefit from the data obtained, for instance household income. Before coming up with comprehensive solutions, the Ministry needs to understand the extent of the problem, Izzah points out.

“There have been so much census exercises carried out, but at the end of the day, citizens are still required to register for BR1M (another BN aid scheme financed by taxpayer’s money). I just don’t understand where does all this data go to?” she questions.

PR intends to make the Women Affairs Ministry a focal point around which solutions are catered. Law reform is needed to scrutinize the working relationship between the Home Ministry, Women Affairs Ministry and agencies under the PM's department which often don't work hand in hand well enough.

Many societal problems are intertwined with issues that originate within the jurisdiction of JKM. Low income and lack of resources available for women often results in housing problems particularly in single-head households.

When children do not get the care, focus and education that they need to break out of the poverty cycle, it may trigger truancy, glue-sniffing, baby dumping, and other social ills. Regrettably there is little police can do about these because those involved are underage.

Teenage truancy can easily lead to a life of crime. In Malaysia, juveniles are not handled separately from adult offenders. Juvenile offenders awaiting trial are allowed to mix with hardcore criminals in normal prisons, this increases their risk to become repeat offenders.

In the same vein, child victims of crimes such as sexual abuse and violence are treated like adult victims under current law. There is no mechanism to manage crimes perpetrated against children with special care by qualified professionals.

There is also no centralized department to provide instantaneous communication to the Women's ministry, the immigration department, and the police in cases of child abduction.

"These issues are like a time bomb. Women's issues are issues that affect Malaysia's demographics. There is no simple answer to the question," Izzah warns.

She adds that with centralized planning, such issues can be tackled by making the various ministries and departments work in tandem and share information. PR's approach challenges the status quo and forces the government to embrace new changes in policy-making, considering the needs of women.

### **Women are an asset**



[3] Izzah explains why women's issues are important in the larger scheme of things. "In talking about a new development model, the focus is no longer about how rich you are. It's about how happy and fulfilled you are. That's why things such as a

“human development index” has been coined,” she adds.

“Malaysia is but a tiny speck in the global scheme of things, so we have no choice but to innovate and to focus on leveraging on our comparative advantage. I believe that Malaysian women are our comparative advantage,” says the mother-of-two.

She believes that if we can find a way to harness the combined strength of women, it will do wonders for our country’s development potential.

Traditionally, Malaysia has a rich history of women involving themselves in politics. Although many women have been on the forefront of the political scene, this has not necessarily translated into more women in positions of power.

Izzah raises the example of her own grandmother, a capable orator, from whom her father inherited some traits of charm. Many other female figures have been instrumental in the nation’s history such as Ibu Zain (pioneer for women’s education), Tun Fatimah Hj Hashim (the first female cabinet minister), and Mrs Bhupalan (social activist who fought for equal pay for women).

However this has not translated into greater empowerment for women as the way the government views women has not really evolved over the years, she says.

When PR took power, it tried to incorporate this aspect in governance. Examples include the 30% representation target for election candidates, the election of female EXCO members in Selangor government, and Penang appointing two female heads of local government.

This demonstrates that PR has evolved faster with regards to understanding how powerful women can be when given greater access to policy making, Izzah adds.

As for her own party, PKR in 2009 was the first (and currently the only) party in Malaysia to amend its constitution to implement a 30% quota for women leaders at the central, state and division levels. This step has been hailed as a first by many women’s rights organizations.

Other than the quota, PKR’s women’s wing prioritises trainings such as Sekolah Politik and Srikandi programs in order to equip women to be successful in their own right, and not just window dressing.

Izzah shares a quote from Condoleezza Rice: “The first rule for a woman leader is you have to be capable in your own right. You are chosen because you are a good leader, and not because you are a woman.”

## **Recognising women’s invisibilised role**



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Press conference by the Parliamentary Women's caucus

Not everyone wants to be a politician. Many ordinary women perform important roles which are often “invisibilised” by society, and overlooked as economic contribution. It is very important for society to recognize and address the needs of these women.

Izzah says that women who are simply homemakers should be respected in their own right, as their duty is no less important. That is the reason PR is introducing the concept of compensating homemakers for their important contribution to the nation, she adds.

One of the most basic issues affecting ordinary women is the lack of a conducive environment to encourage women to go back to work after motherhood. This contributes to the low female labour participation rate. (Malaysia has one of the lowest rates in Southeast Asia).

“I am not a die-hard fan trying to force women to go back to work, but I think women should be given the option to, if they want to,” says Izzah.

Mothers must feel secure when putting their children in a daycare centre. In countries such as the UK, there are stringent rules for childcare professionals to ensure they are qualified to give the best care to children.

With such assurance, women will feel confident about leaving their children at childcare centres as they return to work, rather than having to resort to leaving their children with unknown neighbours –as is the case in many PPR flats.

The current pathetic state of childcare facilities holds women back from achieving their full potential in the workforce, Izzah says. A conducive working environment including flexi hours and childcare facilities will enable more women to have the option to balance family and

career.

The first term lawmaker is grateful that her large extended family assists in sharing the child-raising duties, while she juggles her many roles. She also credits her husband with being a pillar of support and an understanding partner. “I would not be able to do what I do, if I did not have such a supportive husband. Having a supportive husband is amazing. Many women want to participate in politics but without a supportive spouse they are held back,” she says.

Izzah notes that even Parliament did not have a breastfeeding room for working mothers. “After a long hassle, finally my request for a room to breastfeed my baby was granted. However, after I brought my child into that room, a security guard came in with a straight face to tell me that according to the rules of Parliament, no child was allowed to be in any room in the Parliament building.”

“I was appalled. I mean, how am I supposed to breastfeed my child then?” she asked.

### Reforming old ways



[5] Izzah raises the archaic state of religious institutions in Malaysia, pointing out that Syariah courts need to be reformed. “It’s like we’re stuck in this world where the religious departments have not evolved with the times. The fundamental needs of our nation have not been addressed. It saddens me,” says the thirty-two year old.

Muslim women often have a terrible time navigating through divorce due to the inherent obstacles in the Syariah court, Izzah says. She draws a comparison with the time of the prophet where it was much easier for a woman to ask for a divorce.

Women have rights to divorce too, for instance in cases where the husband has committed adultery, Izzah emphasizes. However, these rights have not been practised.

She notes the contradiction between the ease at which a man is allowed to divorce his wife, whereas it seems almost impossible under the current court system to compel the husband to pay alimony.

Any future PR government will have the monumental task of inheriting this complex and flawed system of religious institutions. The

community that will face the brunt of it will be Muslims. Izzah decries that forward thinking Muslim scholars are not given room to express their views because they are seen as being “anti-government”.

Izzah says that the myth of Muslim women being close-minded and subjugated must be shattered. “The Islam that I know teaches me to speak out and stand up for what I believe it,” she says. She shares that it was an Ustaz (religious teacher) who advised her to contest in the 2008 general election.

As a new mother, she was reluctant to stand as a candidate, but the Ustaz advised her that those who are closest to God are those who contribute as much as possible to humanity.

“I remember he told me, how can you restrict your love and care to just one individual, your baby? Motherhood is important, but also there is a whole society which you can learn from and they can in turn learn from you...” she recalls. And with those words, her mind was made up.

When asked if Malaysia is ready for a female Prime Minister, Izzah seemed agitated by the question. She said, “The idea may sound glamorous, but for me, let’s have a good Prime Minister. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a man or woman.” That’s Nurul Izzah – substance over style. –The Rocket

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