

# Malaysia: Engaging Men in Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Initiatives

Farhana Abdul Fatah and SERATA

---

**T**HE BEGINNINGS of women's rights movements in Malaysia can be traced back to then-colonial Malaya in the 1930s, when a group of women Muslim intellectuals called for women's rights to education. Such a move was galvanized by the reform movements in West Asia (Middle East), where these Malaysian women received their education.

Founded in 1929, the Malay Women Teachers' Union promoted formal schooling for Malay women. Over the next two decades, women activists in the Malayan states of Selangor and Perak highlighted cases of sexual molestation and harassment among estate workers.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a century later, the women's rights movement in Malaysia progressed beyond merely addressing education reforms, women's participation in politics, and gender-based violence. A myriad of women's rights organizations also emerged, each with its own distinct focus.

However, as Ng, Mohamad and Tan (2006)<sup>2</sup> conceded in their book on feminism and women's rights in Malaysia, much of the discussion surrounding feminism and women's rights are skewed towards the West Malaysian perspective. This unfortunate reality inadvertently led to insights from East Malaysia – made up of the territories Sabah and Sarawak – being largely dismissed or unheard.

## **SERATA – Centering the Experiences and Voices from East Malaysia**

Formally registered in Sabah, Malaysia in 2018, the Society for Equality, Respect, and Trust for All Sabah (SERATA) made its mark by asking, “Are current women empowerment programs the most effective way to reach gender parity at the workplace?”<sup>3</sup> linking the active participation of fathers as essential to closing the gender gap. At that point, paternity leave was not yet introduced in the Malaysian employment laws.

Since then, SERATA has made significant strides in promoting gender equality and empowerment. An emerging voice for women empowerment regionally and internationally, SERATA has engaged men and boys in partnership with women and girls in important conversations and efforts intended to bring about tangible changes with regards to inclusivity and parity for all. Although SERATA's core focus is on gender equality and women's empowerment, its work also revolves around initiatives to promote equality, inclusivity, and awareness on issues involving the workplace and family. SERATA's work is befitting of its name, which spells out the Malay word that means "equal" or "undifferentiated."

### **Bringing Men and Boys to the Table**

SERATA distinguishes itself from other women's rights groups in Malaysia by including men and boys, as SERATA believes that in order for women to have unimpeded access to participation in the public and private domains, men – the traditional beneficiary of patriarchal structures – need to be involved. Under prevailing structures of patriarchy, men are beneficiaries of socio-economic access and benefits that have been historically exclusive of women; yet, patriarchy has also rendered men victims of unfair societal norms and expectations. "Boys don't cry" and "boys don't wear pink" are prevailing dogmas that not only restrict boys and men from fully embracing their selves, but may ultimately be harmful towards women. In attempts to remedy this, SERATA engages boys and men in activities and programs meant to promote healthy masculinity so that men may become allies of women in the pursuit towards dismantling sexist patriarchal structures.

SERATA's efforts in this regard have been recognized through its partnership with MenCare, a global campaign that was launched in 2011 to champion equitable fatherhood and caregiving. Such programs include organizing Father's Day events, as well as online webinars like "Responsible Dads" held in 2021, which featured a panel of three fathers, one of whom is Saiful Nizam, the father of Ain Husniza, a Malaysian teen who was subjected to widespread public criticism as well as sexualization after her TikTok video exposing rape culture in Malaysian schools became viral.<sup>4</sup> The session highlighted the importance of fathers who are present and involved in their children's lives, and the guests also shared the trials and tribulations they faced as fathers parenting children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



SERATA, in collaboration with Urban Tamu, organized a Father's Day event called 'Bapaku Idolaku' (My father, my idol), June 2023.

In 2023, SERATA continued with initiatives to spread awareness by inviting Australian sociologist and gender studies expert Michael Flood to give a talk entitled "Why engaging men and boys is vital for gender equality initiatives." The key takeaways from the talk included knowledge about key theories and concepts advocating for the need of including men in gender-equal initiatives, and the approaches that can be taken to educate boys from an early age.

## Engaging with the Youth and Public

One of SERATA's core activities involves workshops and training sessions on gender sensitization and awareness. The general Malaysian population arguably lacks knowledge and has limited access to education regarding the concept of gender, its distinction from biological sex, and its relevance as well as importance in public and private domains. SERATA has over the years conducted workshops and training sessions for members of the public, university students, as well as staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that aim to redress this issue.

In June 2022, SERATA was invited by Universiti Malaysia Kelantan – under the sponsorship of American Corner Kelantan – to conduct a program entitled “Breaking Barriers: a women empowerment workshop” to a group of female undergraduate students. Spanning two days, the workshop was attended by approximately thirty students who were exposed to the fundamentals of gender vs. sex, the agents and processes of gendered socialization, as well as the “glass ceiling” and “bamboo ceiling,” which highlight the challenges for women's career progression in the workplace.

Although small in number and scope, this workshop nevertheless signals a minor, yet significant shift in the landscape of gender equality conversations in Malaysia. This is because Kelantan – a state in Malaysia's east-coast – is widely regarded as a bastion for ultra-patriarchal and conservative beliefs and practices that are rooted in both the Malay culture and the Islamic faith. Kelantan is also known nationwide for its numerous Malay-Muslim women entrepreneurs (especially in the beauty industry), a fact which made the participants of the workshop think that women have always been empowered in their communities. Some of them later commented that they were surprised to learn the different forms of gendered bias, prejudice, and discrimination that were subtly in operation and which they realized were also evident in their respective communities.

The “Breaking Barriers” program was duplicated for an online session for women with disabilities in April 2022 with the support of International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). SERATA has also been invited to become a part of similar programs with other public and private higher educational institutions in Malaysia, such as the Unhealthy Relationships webinar with Sunway College in 2022. For two consecutive years, SERATA has also been part of SULAM, a university-level initiative introduced by



Breaking Barriers workshop held at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, June 2022.

the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education to incorporate community-service and society-based learning into academic modules. Specifically, SERATA worked with students from the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, to help them create digital content to educate and spread awareness on gender-based issues such as grooming and domestic violence. Online progress meetings or “check-ins” were conducted throughout the semester-long program to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the information gathered by the students. As part of their assessment, the students were then required to present their materials to SERATA representatives.



Besides working with the youth, SERATA also receives invitations from governmental and non-governmental organizations to conduct workshops on gender sensitization. SERATA tailors the content for each gender sensitization program to fit with individual organization's aims and objectives, although general concepts and theories are covered. For instance, in July 2023 SERATA was invited by ReefCheck Malaysia to conduct a gender sensitization workshop for youths in Semporna as part of its coral conservation program. Fifty youths from three nearby islands (Kulapuan, Larapan and Mabul) attended the program. Through oral presentations, group activities, and discussions, the workshop not only sparked thought-provoking conversations about gender, but the participants were also taught about key concepts that are applicable to their work, such as gender and development, the gendered division of labor, the gender analysis framework, as well as gender and decision-making.

### **Positive Parenting for a Healthier, Happier Family Dynamic**

SERATA's core educational focus also centers on family and parenting. Together with partners, SERATA has organized and conducted numerous programs for the public. In 2019, SERATA conducted a six-week positive parenting program, called "Semarak Kasih," which was part of a feasibility study conducted by Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and UNICEF on the effects of positive parenting towards children.

In 2021, SERATA conducted an online webinar entitled "Working Moms – the good, the bad, the ugly" featuring Tashny Sukumaran, a senior analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia, whose work revolves around policymaking and gender. Panelists made up of experts – executives, academics, as well as SERATA's own co-founder, Robert Hii – also shared their challenges and triumphs as working mothers and supportive partners. The session highlighted vulnerable moments especially in recalling the struggles of balancing career demands with the expectations of being a "good mother," the authenticity of which resonated with the participants.

In 2022, in partnership with the National Population and Family Development Board, SERATA conducted a Parenting Style workshop to assist parents to negotiate the challenges of parenting and to foster closer relationships with their children. The objectives of the program include – providing parents knowledge on healthy parenting; promoting closer bonds

between parents and their children; exposing parents to the challenges of raising children in the modern world; and teaching parents on parenting approaches that are more suited to the demands of today. Three sessions conducted over the span of two days fulfilled these objectives, and the smaller, targeted number of participants resulted in more engaging and invigorating discussions.



One of the positive parenting workshops conducted by SERATA in partnership with the National Population and Family Development Board, 2022.

### **Leading the Charge Towards Reformed Labor Laws**

One of the most pressing issues that are brought to SERATA's attention is the number of sexual harassment cases in the workplace. In most cases, survivors of sexual harassment are afraid of taking action against their perpetrators, choosing the "safe and easy" option instead, of just leaving the workplace.

In 2022, SERATA decided to explore how survivors of sexual harassment could legally take action and found out that not only was Sabah governed by a separate set of laws on employment matters (Federal Malaysia is covered by the Employment Act 1960), the laws also have not been amended since 2005. This means that many of the protections that are guaranteed under Employment Act 1960 such as paternity leave, protection against dismissal while pregnant or compelling an employer to investigate claims of sexual harassment in the workplace, are nonexistent in Sabah. In fact, the lack of these amendments meant that workplaces in Sabah are not conducive for women or working people with families.

Fueled by these revelations, SERATA has prompted efforts towards reforming the Sabah Labour Ordinance (SLO) 1950, as well as promoting awareness on employees' rights. Beginning with a three-day workshop in January 2023, "Opis Idamanku" (translated to "my dream office") was conducted to educate participants on the SLO, their rights to protect themselves in cases of sexual harassment in the workplace, and the importance of parental leave for both mothers and fathers.

In March 2023, a roundtable was held with several Sabah-based civil society organizations (CSOs) and attended by representatives from the Sabah Labour Department, Malaysia Trade Union Congress (MTUC) Sabah Chapter, Sabah Employers Association (SEA), Sabah Human Resource Development Department, and Sabah Trade Union Affairs Department. According to SERATA co-founder and then-president Sabrina Melisa Aripin, Sabah's labor laws – which are older than the formation of Malaysia – have not been amended in nearly two decades. This puts Sabah behind West Malaysia when it comes to issues such as maternal and paternity leave, and investigations of sexual harassment. Aripin added, "Our biggest concern is many employees in Sabah don't actually know their rights as employees, and thus may be easily exploited by unscrupulous employers."

In April 2023, SERATA published a report entitled "Assessing Gender Sensitivity on Labour Laws of the Sabah Labour Ordinance." The report explored the differences between the Sabah Labour Ordinance (also known as the Labour Ordinance [Sabah Cap. 67]) and other existing labor laws in Malaysia, namely the Employment Act 1955 (EA) by focusing on gendered issues such as protection against sexual harassment and parental leave entitlement. The key findings are summarized as follows:



***a. Lack of provisions protecting workers from sexual harassment in the workplace***

In July 2022, the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act was passed by Dewan Rakyat (Malaysia's House of Representatives). According to SERATA's report, certain provisions covered under the amended Act do not apply to employers in Sabah. They are as follows:

- Inquiry into complaints of sexual harassment made by employers as mentioned in 81B under the Employment Act;
- The need to take disciplinary action towards the harasser if found guilty to have committed any sexual harassment offences;
- The offences applicable towards employers who fail to act on any complaint relating to sexual harassment stated are liable to a fine up to ten thousand ringgit (RM10, 000).

Therefore, employees in Sabah have less legal measures in place to safeguard and protect them against sexual harassment incidents at the workplace.

***b. Inadequate protection for mothers and fathers in the workplace***

Following the Employment Act Amendment 2022, maternity leave is increased from 60 to 98 days. This federal provision is applicable to all working women regardless of salary level, and acts as additional protection against unreasonable termination on grounds of pregnancy. However, the SLO does not reflect this amendment and retained the 60-day maternity leave for pregnant Sabahan employees.

Pertaining to paternal rights, the federal Employment Act Amendment 2022 instated seven consecutive days of paternity leave, eligible to male workers that fulfil the following conditions:

- Employed for a minimum of one year;
- Entitled to only five births, regardless of the number of wives;<sup>5</sup>
- Effective on the day of delivery.

At the time of the report's publication, SLO does not have provisions for paternity leave.

The urgency for paternity leave was highlighted in May 2023, when Sabahan Fridentsteward Jailon came home from work to discover that his



Front cover of SERATA's report on the SLO

wife – who had just given birth several days prior – had died. It was reported that Jailon's employers had requested that he return to work two days after his wife's delivery, which left Jailon unable to perform his duty as a husband to care for his wife. A grieving Jailon then penned a heartfelt post on his social media account that directed his distress to his employers, saying "I wanted to take leave, but they told me 'it is even better if I can come to work.' What is this? I work very hard, but the pay does not even commensurate. How much can you pay to return my wife's life?"

Jailon's case renewed pressure from the public and civil society organizations (csos) to reform Sabah's outdated labor laws. In June 2024, SERATA started an online fundraising campaign for Jailon's one year-old baby – Erol Erando Exly - who had been diagnosed with Thalassemia Major, an inherited blood disorder that affects the body's ability to produce haemoglobin and healthy red blood cells. The fundraiser received RM3, 017.50 (approximately US\$700) in just two days.



Online fundraising appeal for Baby Erol

Then, in July 2024, several of the demands laid out in SERATA's report were finally tabled, discussed, and then passed at the Dewan Rakyat. These key demands included granting pregnant female employees 98-day maternity leave, and giving fathers 7-day paternity leave. However,

the reforms demanded pertaining to protection against sexual harassment cases in the workplace have yet to be attained. SERATA continues to advocate for and promote awareness on employee rights in Sabah via its social media platforms. For instance, an online webinar entitled "Employers' role and responsibilities to prevent sexual harassment" was conducted in June 2023.

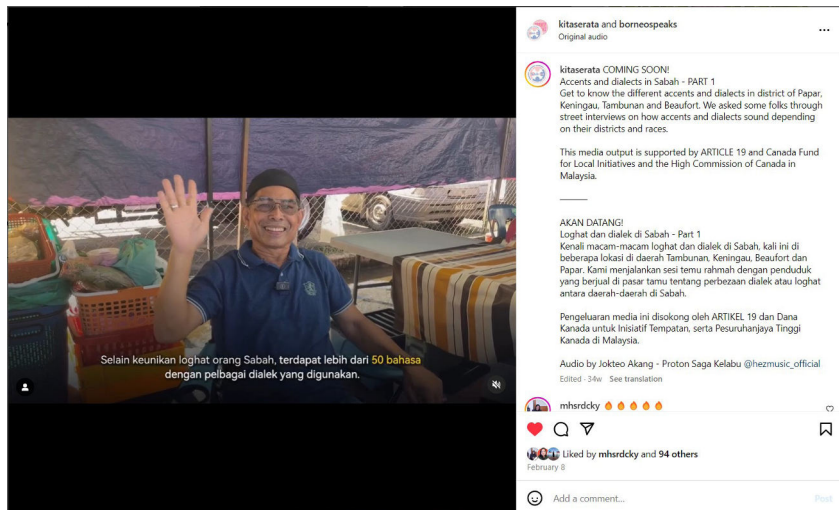


Poster on amendments to the SLO

## Raising Awareness on Diversity in Malaysia

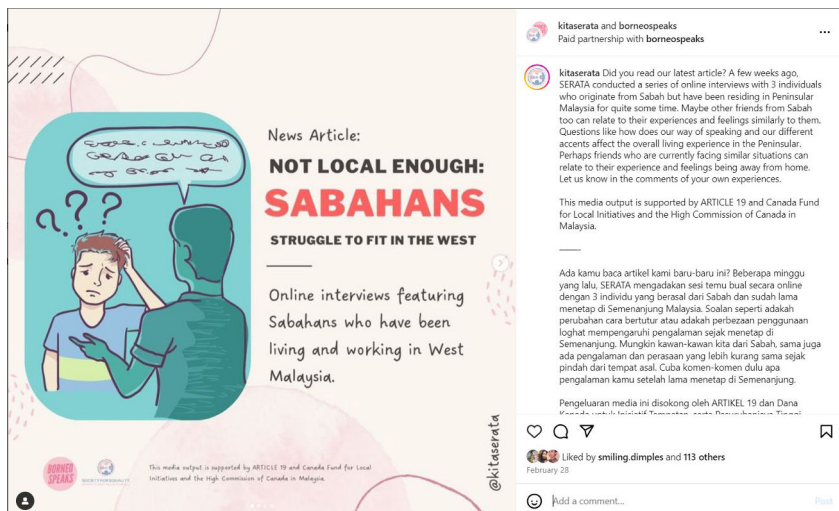
Malaysia is known for three major ethnic groups; but East Malaysia is home to a large number of ethnic groups that are indigenous to the island of Borneo. Sabah alone is home to over thirty ethnic groups, with the largest being the Kadazan Dusun. The Kadazan Dusun people are often collectively grouped with the Rungus and Murut to make up the "KDMR," whose culture and tradition are deemed representative of Sabah.

With the support of Article 19 and Borneo Speaks, SERATA released a number of infographics, videos and an article under a project titled "Reclaiming Sabah Voices." The overall goal of the program is to explore and normalize the different dialects and accents of Sabahans beyond the widely accepted representation (i.e., the KDMR dialect spoken by the urbanites of Penampang district) by bringing in voices and diverse dialects from all over Sabah, from the West Coast to the East Coast.



SERATA aims to raise awareness about the diversity of ethnicities and dialects in Sabah.

The program also highlights how differences in accents have affected Sabahans who are working in West Malaysia. SERATA conducted interviews with Sabahans in West Malaysia to share their experiences of being “othered” by West Malaysians due to their non-standard dialect.



“Not Local Enough” shares the plight of Sabahans working and living in West Malaysia.

SERATA's commitment on raising awareness on Sabahan diversity is further explored through their current project titled "Stories of Life at Home," supported by the British Council and Junction 15, which aims to tell the lived realities of the people in Sabah, through the lens of their socio-economic status, and how it affects their lives. By allowing them to document their individual stories, they will craft a common thread narrative across various areas of the state and how a state within Malaysia is as different as they are common. A call for participation for ten local community filmmakers was announced, and the selected filmmakers attended a filmmaking workshop to further hone their skills. The premiere of this community film took place on 30 August, 2024.

### **Overcoming the Divide – Issues and Challenges**

Sabah is a 2.5-hour plane ride away from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur where decision-makers and funders are mainly located. As such, getting to Kuala Lumpur to ensure Sabahan representation and narratives are properly considered comes at an extra cost of time and money. This has always been a prominent issue to be addressed when it comes to funding from potential sponsors. However, with increased awareness among several local and international organizations on the need for East Malaysian representation to address nationwide issues, SERATA is optimistic that Sabahan voices would continue to be heard at the decision-making table.

The move to remote work and online workshops and conferences due to the COVID-19 pandemic had helped level the playing field and brought more opportunities for SERATA to showcase its work beyond the borders. For example, SERATA was invited to deliver several webinar sessions at the national level by organizations such as the Malaysian Institute of Accountants, TalentCorp Malaysia and Kolej Komuniti Hulu Langat, a community college located in West Malaysia.

SERATA is made up of a small number of dedicated individuals with varying backgrounds – advocacy, law, business, health, and education. This has somewhat limited its capacity to engage in larger-scale, big-budget projects. However, SERATA has seen a gradual increase in visibility and membership over the years. SERATA thus hopes to grow its membership via recruitment, as well as providing internship opportunities to college and university students.



Being part of some Malaysian NGO coalitions, such as the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process (COMANGO) and CSO Platform for Reform, has also helped SERATA as a small organization, to amplify issues to get more attention and support. For example, SERATA assisted the whistleblowers in a case of workplace sexual harassment that happened in a government agency in Sabah. Through the support of CSO Platform for Reform, SERATA was able to obtain over two hundred endorsements from organizations and individuals on its press statement to demand proper investigation into the sexual harassment case, which later on led to the perpetrator being removed from his position in the government agency.

The topic of engaging men and boys in gender equality initiatives is still a rather niche area. This can be seen in light of the fact that most gender equality initiatives and calls for proposals focusing on gender in Malaysia tend to revolve around women empowerment. As such, it has been a challenge to find funders willing to support the kind of work that SERATA is interested in.

Despite these challenges, SERATA is gaining more traction due to the novelty and uniqueness of its advocacy work. SERATA believes that awareness and empowerment of individuals on their rights are key to bringing positive change to the country. And this will only be possible when SERATA also works on dismantling prejudices, presumptions and outdated stereotypes.

### **Moving Forward – Upcoming Projects and Programs**

SERATA continues with its advocacy programs that focus on grassroots participation, together with its community partners. Over the years, SERATA has engaged with community partners made up of environmental, health, religious, arts, and human rights organizations to address targeted concerns that are in line with the mission and objectives of both SERATA and its partners. These include Reef Check Malaysia, Sabah Aids Support Services Association (KASIH), Good Shepherd Services, Urban Tamu, and Pusat Komus. SERATA members also continue to contribute their expertise and experience that includes providing training on gender sensitization to these organizations and the communities they work with, and collaborating with them to bring meaningful activities to their community events.

Extending beyond the core focus on gender parity, SERATA recently proposed a program concerning interfaith relations and dialogue. SERATA believes that respect can only emerge from real understanding and non-



SERATA facilitated a workshop on strategic planning (SWOT analysis, long-term and short-term goals) for the Pertubuhan Wanita Orang Asal Malaysia (PWOAM) to empower indigenous women.

judgment over unique lived human experiences. The objectives of the program are as follows:

- To promote healthy discourse between individuals of hidden and marginalized identities;
- To begin to dismantle misinformation, stereotypes, and prejudice towards these individuals; and
- To educate members of the public on the different forms of stigma and discrimination that exist within communities.

SERATA had previously collaborated with Impact Hub Kuala Lumpur to organize “Human Library,” where five “human books” with life experiences on ethnicity, religion, disability, and social status were featured. In this proposed program, tentatively named “A Coffee Date with Humanity,” participants will have the opportunity to learn more about a religious and/or cultural experience or practice through a “resource person.”

### **Some Reflections**

SERATA has evolved tremendously since its inception in 2018 with just a handful of volunteers and a makeshift workspace in a corner of a home, fu-

eled with passion to work on ending gender-based violence and improving women's representation at all levels in the workplace. Today, SERATA has two full-time staff and an executive committee with a fully functional office space.

The idea of engaging men and boys in gender equality came from years of observing initiatives such as the White Ribbon campaign that originated in Canada which calls on men to proactively end violence against women and girls after a massacre of fourteen female engineering students at École Polytechnique in 1989 by a 25-year-old man named Marc Lépine.

The focus on this particular area of gender has helped SERATA's advocacy work. Bringing up the topic of gender equality, especially at a time where people commonly associate feminism with men-hating tropes, is not always easy. But SERATA found that when it includes men and boys in the conversation, the energy shifts and people become more curious about the work it does and why.

Because of this, SERATA will continue working together with community partners and dedicated members of the public in pursuit of gender equality and women empowerment by including men and boys and centering the East Malaysian experience.

## Endnotes

1 Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad & Tan Beng Hui, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*, Routledge, 2006.

2 Ng, Mohamad and Tan, *ibid*.

3 Let dads rock the cradle too, *The Star*, 11 January 2018, [www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2018/01/11/let-dads-rock-the-cradle-too/](http://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2018/01/11/let-dads-rock-the-cradle-too/).

4 The 17-year-old exposing rape culture in Malaysian schools, Al-Jazeera, 19 May 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/19/the-17-year-old-exposing-rape-culture-in-malaysian-schools>.

5 Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country whose Islamic marital laws permit Muslim men to marry up to four wives.