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GENDER STEREOTYPES AND POLITICAL CULTURE: EXPLORING BIAS AGAINST FEMALE POLITICAL LEADERS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

To date, gender inequality remains a globally concerning issue, especially in politics. Despite evolving trends towards gender equality, Malaysian women remain under-represented in political leadership, even though they constitute approximately half of Malaysia's population. This study aimed to examine gender inequality in Malaysian politics through the lens of whether women are more suitable for political positions. Data of 1313 respondents were used to analyse the biases by using the logit and probit models. Categorical principal component analysis and the Approximate Likelihood Ratio (LR) test were used to examine the reliability and validity of the results. The findings indicated that gender stereotypes strongly influence individuals' biases. The respondents commonly believed that men are naturally born leaders and better compared with women. This perception is shaped by several factors, including the importance of education, professional experience, job availability, and income disparities. A factor of political culture suggests that male leaders are preferred, especially in democratically governed countries. However, surprisingly, Malaysian individuals satisfied with Malaysia's current political system tended to disagree with the idea that men are inherently better political leaders than women. Factors like age, religion, and employment status also contributed to biases against female leaders. In conclusion, this research underscores the

enduring gender disparities in Malaysian politics and the detrimental impact of entrenched stereotypes on women's leadership prospects. It is important to address these biases in promoting gender equality and enhancing better human development in the arena of politics.

Keywords: Gender inequality, gender stereotypes, political culture, leadership bias, female political participation, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

World Bank Group (2023) stated that women comprised almost half of the world total population in year of 2022, suggesting that there is a demand for active women participation in all societal levels, includes the trio of political, social and economic spheres. These three spheres are integral with the human rights, as acknowledged by World Bank Group (2022). A well-functioning political system should encompass a variety of interest groups, including women, in the decision-making process. However, the recent report from United Nations Women (2025) indicates that women often seem under-represented in political institutions, as they face many obstacles, such as a lack of support from both political parties and families, along with societal norms that favour male dominance (Suffian, 2021). This barrier creates further gender disparities in politics, particularly in power-driven sectors.

In the study by Bauer (2019), gender-based stereotypes significantly influence voters' judgements regarding political discourse, with voters frequently associating certain issues with specific gender competencies. These perceptions limit opportunities and perpetuate unequal treatment, particularly towards female leadership. Although Malaysia has developed legal frameworks to combat these prejudices, they remain persistent (United Nations Women, 2025). Past studies (e.g., Bauer, 2019; Shiang & Ngo, 2020; Suffian, 2021) have noted that, despite women having higher levels of education than men, they remain undervalued and restricted in their pursuit of career advancement. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, published by the World Economic Forum (2023), Malaysia is ranked 103rd overall, indicating substantial opportunities for development in terms of gender equality, women's representation across all sectors, and the advancement of women in communities where they are marginalised.

This study aims to examine how gender inequality is framed in Malaysian politics, particularly in light of increasing female participation in political parties. This study also examines the motivation behind women's lower levels of political power. It examines the political culture, individual biases, and other factors that perpetuate gender stereotypes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role Congruity Theory

Social role theory posits that individuals categorise themselves into different social roles in society, and division of labour is based on gender, leading to a cultural stereotype of gender-specific societal expectations (Eagly, 1987). Grounded on the tenets of social role theory, Eagle and Karau (2002) developed

the role congruity theory, which emphasized that the perceived incongruity between female gender roles and other leadership roles would lead to prejudicial behaviours against women leaders.

The role congruity theory and social role theory have been applied in different studies relating to gender inequality. Schaffer (2008) suggested that demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and cultural values, namely masculinity, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance will likely be the result of exclusion and potential gender discrimination in the workplace. In a male-dominated venture capital industry, Butticè et al. (2023) found that female entrepreneurs did better on venture performance when partnered with male investors. Furthermore, Jones and Pal (2022) found that there were few female leaders in the higher education sector.

The female gender being viewed as less competent and thus, the devaluation of women in leadership roles has hindered their advancement opportunities. Therefore, the role congruity theory provides a good explanation to support the direct relationship of political culture, individual bias, and other determinants—age, religious denomination, and employment status—with gender inequality in Malaysian politics.

Individual Bias against Female Leaders

Cultural norms continue to shape perceptions of gender roles in political leadership. According to Inglehart et al. (2003), the traditional belief entrenched gender roles that portray men as providers and women as carers has placed men as more suitable for leadership. As postulated by Abele et al. (2016), Hentschel et al. (2021), and Koenig & Eagly (2014), these roles contribute to continuing stereotypes which are fostered by traits related to communality, such as cooperation and nurturing, which are connected to women, and traits connected to agency, such as assertiveness and independence that are generally linked to men. Therefore, women are expected to perform well in caregiving roles, while men are often thought to be better suited to handle security and defence-related issues.

Meanwhile, Hentschel et al. (2021) contend that these enduring presumptions play a role in the under-representation of women in the position of political leadership around the world, especially in Malaysia, where gender norms continue to have a significant impact (Hamid & Muzafar, 2024). Even though women's political participation is now greater in some more egalitarian nations, such as China and Malaysia (LPPKN, 2025; Yan, 2025), numerous regions of Asia continue to face enormous barriers. For example, Thompson (2022) found that out of 13 Asian female leaders, only Tsai Ing-Wen of Taiwan was elected independently; other female leaders came to power through political ties within the family. This demonstrates how deeply embedded systemic gender barriers are.

Women who obtained a leadership role solely through their outstanding capability are further hindered by customs and religious beliefs in some nations (Koburtay et al., 2023). The presence of a few female leaders does not illustrate widespread progress, as United Nations Women (2025) emphasizes. In order to achieve true political equality, eliminating ingrained prejudices and creating inclusive political environments is necessary to give women the same opportunities to lead as men.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are influenced by the persistent societal beliefs about the proper traits and roles of men and women. According to social role theory, gender expectations are predetermined according to perceived societal roles, which are based on the perceptions rooted in traditional divisions of labour in the workplace and at home (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Furthermore, according to role congruity theory, women are frequently discriminated as they are considered to be incompatible with leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schock et al., 2019). As a result, these deeply ingrained stereotypes restrict women's ability to advance from household roles into political leadership, thereby strengthening structural impediments to gender equality.

Subsequently, such gender stereotypes continue to influence decisions in professional settings related to hiring and promoting women due to broad beliefs about women's capabilities (Hentschel et al., 2018; Heilman et al., 2015). In the context of security concerns, traditionally, families favouring boys over girls in terms of gaining access to better education and career development (Kim & Kang, 2021). Such phenomena regarding gender disparities have been frequently highlighted in past studies (Bauer, 2019; Holman et al., 2016).

Knowles & Lowery (2012), Chicago Booth (2013), and Khan (2023) further contend that the traditional beliefs of male authority in families are challenged as gender norms develop, with a rising number of women becoming primary earners. Despite the gradual evolution, society still assumes men are better qualified than women for leadership positions due to the deeply rooted gender stereotypes that continue to influence outcomes for both genders. Hence, in the present study, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_1: Gender stereotypes are positively related to the individual bias against female leaders.

Political Culture

A study by Bugaje et al. (2023) reveals that culture plays a fundamental role in reinforcing one's beliefs, values, and behaviors in decision-making at the personal level and in society. Notably, culture can change into political culture, which is a powerful force in the evolution of democratic and societal values (Welzel, 2016). Thus, this relationship explains the development of democratic values and how gender roles and participation in politics are affected by the deeply ingrained cultural norms (Bauer, 2019; Hentschel et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2016). There is a greater possibility of promoting gender parity and inspiring female participation in politics in societies where the political culture is inclusive.

Women in leadership roles are one of the key indicators of gender equality based on the true democracy's core values (Kim & Kang, 2021; Koburtay et al., 2023). However, women continue to face significant disadvantages in political institutions, although they constitute around half of the population in the world (United Nations Women, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2023). According to the United Nations Women report (2025), the rising number of female leaders involved in political decision-making increases parental leave and childcare coverage, greatly lowers gender-based violence, advances gender-equality policies, and makes electoral reform easier. The framework of role congruity theory explains these positive outcomes (Eagly & Karau, 2002), whereby resistance to female leadership is cited as perceived mismatches between gender and leadership expectations.

To create a political system with equal participation from both genders that is possible and valued, it requires more than policy reform, whereby the shifts in political norms and cultural attitudes are inevitable (United Nations, 2022; Welzel, 2016). In a nutshell, an individual's bias concerning gender roles in leadership tends to be influenced by political culture. Thus, in the present study, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_2: There is a significant relationship between political culture and individual bias against female leaders.

Other Determinants

To date, there is limited female representation in political leadership, which exerts a significant concern despite global efforts in promoting gender equality (Oberauer et al., 2022), with Malaysia sharing the same predicament (Azmi et al., 2024). Socio-economic factors shape the perceptions of female leadership in the political scene, apart from the extensive influence of gender stereotypes. The major cause of this imbalance is the impact of age in judging the suitability of a leader.

Additionally, older generations tend to believe that men holding political roles are more appropriate than women due to the societal norms of their generations. On the contrary, the younger age cohorts under the influence of global gender equality advocacy are more likely to adopt more egalitarian views (Inglehart et al., 2003; Yan, 2025). McClean and Ono (2024) also denote that there is a gradual change in younger voters' attitudes contributing to the increased acceptance of female political leaders, as they prioritise societal values and issues over the gender of political candidates.

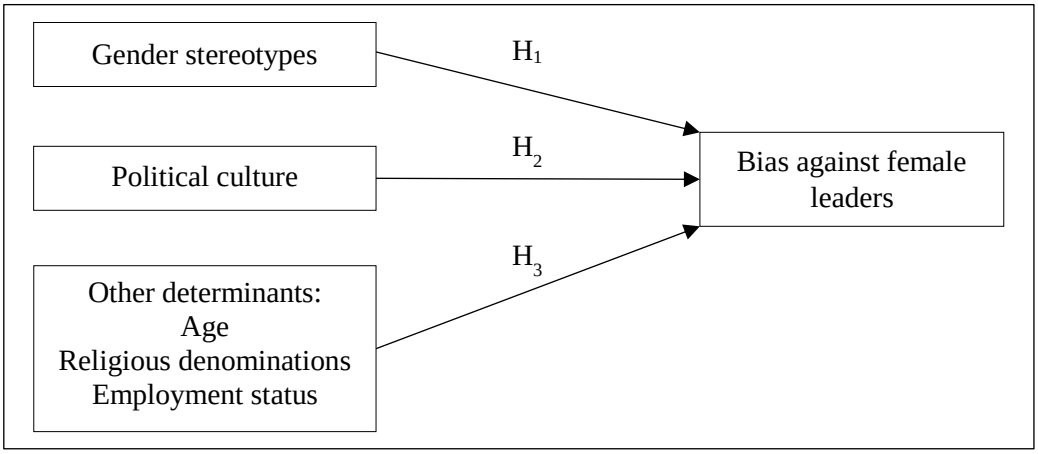
In Malaysia, the religious denominations are tied to the unique ethnic composition of a multicultural society (Koay et al., 2020), hence they may influence the participation of female leaders. Moreover, gender biases in politics are shaped by the status of employment and religious denominations (United Nations, 2022). In view of this, there is a complex connection between religious norms and political inclusion, as Olomola (2023) found that the continuous under-representation of women in legislative bodies across other non-Christian and Islamic countries.

Nonetheless, the women's accomplishments in their careers continue to be thwarted by the employment-related gender stereotypes. Van Borm and Baert (2022) and Hentschel et al. (2019) reveal that hiring and promotion decisions were often shaped by the traditional beliefs about gender roles, giving men the advantages in leadership roles. Thus, both cultural and socio-economic factors intensify the challenges to female participation in politics and leadership roles. Hence, the following hypothesis in the present study is proposed:

H_3: Age, religious denominations, and employment status are significant in explaining the individual bias against female leaders.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Research



METHODOLOGY

The empirical results were obtained based on a sample of 1313 respondents in Malaysia. Data was also gathered from the most recent seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) (2022) data. The WVS (www.worldvaluessurvey.org) is an international collaboration among social scientists in studying human values, beliefs, and inspirations influencing social and political lives. The WVS covers about 90 percent of the world's population, as it serves almost 100 countries with a standard questionnaire. Therefore, the use of WVS data has been widely accepted by social science journals and some world reports, such as the World Happiness Report 2012 released by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (Helliwell et al., 2012).

This study has utilised the survey data released by the WVS (2022). The study sample was obtained using the probability proportional to size sampling technique, so as to ensure nationwide representation. As published by the Malaysian Department of Statistics in 2018, Malaysia's population was recorded as 31,858,000, and from this official figure 1,313 respondents were selected (WVS, 2022). All households in the sample frame were categorised into 13 states and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. Simultaneously, within each stratum (state), the secondary level of stratification was established according to the settlement type (urban/rural). This was determined by the urban-rural ratios at the state level (see Table 1). Subsequently, the samples in each stratum were further stratified by gender and age to reflect the sociodemographic characteristics in Malaysia (see Table 2). For example, 5.7% of Malaysians resided in Kelantan. Therefore, 5.7% (74 people) of the respondents from Kelantan were selected. Among them, 31 respondents were from urban areas, while 43 respondents were from the rural regions of Kelantan (see Table 1).

Table 1

Allocation of Respondents in Each of the States in Malaysia

Demographics			Percentage of Total Population		No. of Respondents		
State	% of Total Malaysian population	Total population (‘000)	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Total
Johor	11.5	3686	71.9	28.1	109	42	151
Kedah	6.7	2147	64.6	35.4	56	30	86
Kelantan	5.7	1827	42.4	57.6	31	43	74
Melaka	2.9	929	86.5	13.5	34	5	39
Negeri Sembilan	3.5	1122	66.5	33.5	32	16	48
Pahang	5.1	1635	50.5	49.5	34	34	68
Perak	7.8	2500	69.7	30.3	72	32	104
Perlis	0.8	256	51.4	48.6	11	11	22
Penang	5.4	1731	90.8	9.2	65	7	72
Selangor	19.9	6378	91.4	8.6	232	22	254
Terengganu	3.8	1218	59.1	40.9	30	20	50
Sabah	12.1	3878	54.0	46.0	84	71	155
Sarawak	8.6	2756	53.8	46.2	63	55	118
Federal	5.6	1795	100	0	72	0	72
Total	100	31,858			925	388	1,313

Source. World Values Survey, 2022.

Table 2 displays the characteristics of the selected sample, which consisted of 1313 respondents who were aged between 18 and 65 years old. This sample accurately represented the Malaysian population, as stipulated by the Age of Majority Act 1971, which has defined the majority group as individuals aged 18 years and older. Furthermore, the eligible voting age in Malaysia has been lowered from 21 to 18 since 2019 (Saidin & Azrun, 2025). Again, the selected sample from the ages of 18 to 65 was considered suitable for studying the individual bias against female leaders in the Malaysian political arena.

Table 2

Characteristics of the Selected Sample

		Sex		No. of Respondents		
State	Total	Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Johor	151	64	87	47	65	39
Kedah	86	38	48	35	33	18
Kelantan	74	44	30	22	29	23
Melaka	39	23	16	14	18	7
Negeri Sembilan	48	28	20	15	21	12
Pahang	68	38	30	25	29	14
Perak	104	52	52	32	53	19
Perlis	22	10	12	7	12	3
Penang	72	52	20	22	26	24
Selangor	254	120	134	72	97	85
Terengganu	50	30	20	21	18	11
Sabah	155	61	94	54	75	26
Sarawak	118	61	57	40	45	33
Federal	72	40	32	13	22	37
Total	1313	661	652	419	543	351

Source. World Values Survey, 2022.

Based on the study's literature review, the following empirical model represented as Equation (1) was proposed:

$$Indbias = \partial' + \beta_1 GS_i + \beta_2 PC_i + \beta_3' x_i' + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where *Indbias* represents the individual's bias against the female leader. This variable is proxied by the item, "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do?" with a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The α' are the cut-off values in the ordered logit and probit models; β are the estimates of regressors; ε represents the error term, and *i* denotes the *i-th* respondent.

This study measures the gender stereotypes (*GS*) based on four separate items from the WVS, which were as follows: (i) "A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl." (*GS1*); (ii) "On the whole, men make better business executives than women do." (*GS2*); (iii) "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women." (*GS3*); and (iv) "If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems." (*GS4*). All these four items were scaled from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) too. Since *GS* was the primary explanatory variable in this study, the Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CatPCA) were run to ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments used before the ordered logit and ordered probit modelling.

The political cultures (*PC*) were represented by the following two items: (i) "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means "not at all important" and

10 means "absolutely important", what position would you choose?" and (ii) "On a scale from 1 to 10 where "1" is "not satisfied at all" and "10" is "completely satisfied", how satisfied are you with how the political system is functioning in your country these days?". The variable 'x' was a vector of control variables that included age (AGE), being employed (JOB), Muslim (MUSLIM), Buddhist (BUDDHIST), marital status (MARRIED), and religiosity, where respondents were asked, "How important is God in your life? (RELIGIOSITY) Please use this scale to indicate your view: 10 means "very important" and 1 means "not at all important.".

Since the individual's bias against female leaders, referred to as *Indbias*, was represented by an item with a 4-point scale, it constituted an ordinal-scaled measurement. Therefore, the ordered logit and ordered probit modelling approaches have been used to estimate Equation (1). The estimated coefficients from the ordered logit modelling represented the ln odds ratio of being biased against female leaders (scale = 1, 2, 3, and 4), with a corresponding one-unit change in the respective regressor. Conversely, the estimated coefficients from the ordered probit modelling reflected the utility index of being biased against female leaders (scale = 1, 2, 3, and 4). Following the regression, Approximate Likelihood Ratio (LR) tests were conducted to ensure that the parallel assumption underlying both the ordered logit and probit models was satisfied to obtain valid estimations. The Pseudo-R2 from the regression measured the goodness of fit of the model to the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for both the regress and regressors. In contrast, Table 4 provides the correlation analysis. The results indicate that all the correlation coefficients were below 0.80, which indirectly suggested that the empirical analysis did not demonstrate a severe multicollinearity problem typically encountered in cross-sectional data analysis.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

	Indbias	*GS1*	*GS2*	*GS3*	*GS4*	*PC1*	*PC2*
Indbias	1						
GS1	0.54***	1					
GS2	0.62***	0.67***	1				
GS3	0.55***	0.51***	0.56***	1			
GS4	0.33***	0.37***	0.38***	0.40***	1		
PC1	0.02	-0.04	-0.08**	-0.03	-0.08**	1	
PC2	0.13***	0.21***	0.16***	0.17***	0.12***	-0.03	1
AGE	-0.13***	-0.04	-0.06*	-0.03	0.01	0.15***	-0.10***
JOB	0.10***	0.08**	0.07**	0.11***	-0.01	0.01	-0.02
MUSLIM	0.31***	0.17***	0.16***	0.21***	0.06*	-0.01	0.18***
BUDDHIST	-0.10***	-0.09***	-0.02	-0.06*	0.04	-0.02	-0.10***
MARRIED	0.06*	0.08**	0.05	0.12***	-0.01	0.08**	0.02
RELIGIOSITY	0.10***	-0.01	-0.02	0.06*	-0.06*	0.25***	0.07**

Table 4a

Correlation Analysis

Variable	Observation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Indbias	1313	2.69	0.92	1	4
GS1	1313	2.26	0.94	1	4
GS2	1313	2.42	0.89	1	4
GS3	1313	3.30	1.25	1	5
GS4	1313	2.89	1.08	1	5
PC1	1313	8.19	1.86	1	10
PC2	1313	5.38	2.58	1	10
AGE	1313	38.33	13.21	18	80
JOB	1313	0.74	0.44	0	1
MUSLIM	1313	0.58	0.49	0	1
BUDDHIST	1313	0.17	0.38	0	1
MARRIED	1313	0.62	0.49	0	1
RELIGIOSITY	1313	8.4	2.06	1	10

Notes. The asterisk (*) represents the significance level: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, and *** p < 0.10.

Table 4b

Correlation Analysis (Continued)

	AGE	*JOB*	*MUSLIM*	*Buddhist*	*Married*	*RELIGIOSITY*
Indbias						
GS1						
GS2						
GS3						
GS4						
PC1						
PC2						
AGE	1					
JOB	-0.05	1				
MUSLIM	-0.23***	-0.01	1			
BUDDHIST	0.19***	-0.01	-0.54***	1		
MARRIED	0.40***	0.07*	0.05	0.01	1	
RELIGIOSITY	-0.14***	-0.04	0.31***	-0.38***	0.01	1

Notes. The asterisk (*) represents the significance level: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, and *** p < 0.10.

Table 5 displays the model summary of CatPCA for the GS, where the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.80, indicating that the instruments (*GS1* to *GS4*) were reliable in measuring the GS.

Table 5

Model Summary of CatPCA for the Main Explanatory Variable, GS

Variables	Component loading	Variance Accounted For		
		Cronbach's Alpha	Total Eigenvalue	% of Variance
GS		0.80	2.50	62.53
Items:				
GS1	0.842			
GS2	0.859			
GS3	0.807			
GS4	0.635			

Table 6 reports the regression results for Equation (1). Columns 1, 3, and 5 show the results obtained from ordered logit modelling, while Columns 2, 4, and 6 present the estimated outcomes of the ordered probit modelling on perceived individual bias against female leaders based on four scales. For robustness checking, Columns 1 and 2 focus solely on gender stereotype variables, whereas Columns 3 and 4 include only political culture variables. Columns 5 and 6 comprise both gender stereotype and political culture variables. The results regarding the signs and significance were consistent across the models from Columns 1 to 6. Therefore, the following empirical analysis was reported based on Columns 5 and 6.

Table 6

Regression Results

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
GS1	0.43***	0.25***			0.45***	0.26***
	(0.08)	(0.05)			(0.09)	(0.05)
GS2	1.18***	0.62***			1.20***	0.63***
	(0.10)	(0.05)			(0.10)	(0.05)
GS3	0.46***	0.26***			0.47***	0.27***
	(0.06)	(0.03)			(0.06)	(0.03)
GS4	0.10*	0.07**			0.12**	0.08**
	(0.06)	(0.03)			(0.06)	(0.03)
PC1			0.10***	0.06***	0.09***	0.05***
			(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
PC2			0.06***	0.03***	-0.05**	-0.03*
			(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)
AGE	-0.01**	-0.010***	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.02***	-0.01***
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
JOB	0.25**	0.15**	0.41***	0.25***	0.23*	0.14*
	(0.13)	(0.07)	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.13)	(0.07)
MUSLIM	0.98***	0.56***	1.27***	0.73***	1.03***	0.59***
	(0.14	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.08)	(0.14)	(0.08)
BUDDHIST	0.37**	0.23**	0.55***	0.29***	0.34*	0.21**
	(0.18)	(0.10)	(0.17)	(0.10)	(0.18)	(0.10)

(continued)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
MARRIED	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.06
	(0.13)	(0.07)	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.13)	(0.07)
RELIGIOSITY	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Constant cut1	3.24***	1.78***	-0.91**	-0.56***	3.58***	1.98***
	(0.41)	(0.23)	(0.37)	(0.22)	(0.45)	(0.26)
Constant cut2	6.17***	3.43***	1.09***	0.59***	6.53***	3.64***
	(0.43)	(0.24)	(0.37)	(0.22)	(0.48)	(0.27)
Constant cut3	8.87***	4.93***	2.93***	1.69***	9.24***	5.15***
	(0.47)	(0.26)	(0.38)	(0.22)	(0.51)	(0.28)
Observations	1,313	1,313	1,313	1,313	1,313	1,313
LR χ^2	907.73***	888.35***	176.74***	173.22***	921.26***	901.30***
Pseudo R^2	0.27	0.26	0.05	0.05	0.27	0.27
Approximate LR test	15.66	16.20	16.89	17.05	20.36	21.45

Notes. The standard errors are reported in parentheses. The asterisk (*) represents the significance level: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, and *** $p < 0.10$. The significant LR χ^2 test indicates that the model is significant. Pseudo-R^2 displays the goodness of fit of the model to the data. The Insignificant Approximate LR test shows that the parallel assumption is met.

Both ordered logit and probit modelling results in Columns 5 and 6 show a significant impact of gender stereotypes on individual bias against female leaders in Malaysia. Individuals who perceived that (i) a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl, (ii) men make better business executives than women do, (iii) when jobs are scarce, men should have more fitting to a job than women, and (iv) it is a problem if women have more income than their husbands, respectively, are more likely to agree that men make better political leaders than women do.

This may be due to the uniform differences in the personality traits ascribed to males and females. A typical female is seen as warm, gentle, kind, and passive, while a typical male is viewed as tough, aggressive, and assertive (Holman et al., 2016). Hence, a male is given the priority to have education and jobs, while the female is expected to focus more on family (Kim & Kang, 2021). Consequently, a male leader is expected to perform better than a female leader.

Furthermore, the results also show that gender stereotypes about women's capabilities as leaders are one of the significant factors that make women less preferable in the leadership selection. These biases are due to the societal views where people perceive men are more suitable as leaders compared to women due to their masculine characteristics and behaviours. These gender stereotypes significantly form the ratio of men and women leaders, regardless of the presence of qualified women candidates in the political arena in Malaysia.

Additionally, the empirical results in this study also support that individuals who think it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically are more likely to agree that male leaders perform better than women leaders. This is aligned with the reality of the political sphere in Malaysia. Democratically, Malaysians are given the opportunity and right to vote for their preferred politicians, where men have won the most seats compared to women since the country's independence in 1957 (Azizah, 2002).

Surprisingly, the individuals who were more satisfied with the current political system in Malaysia tended to disagree that men were better political leaders than women. This implies that the female leaders currently holding office are being credited for doing a good job. This might be the reason why the number of female leaders in Malaysia is increasing. For instance, the appointment of Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as the Deputy Prime Minister in 2018 was indeed a great honour for all females in the country (Bernama, 2018).

Based on the results obtained from this study, there is clear statistical evidence in support of Hypothesis 2. Political culture holds an important role in developing bias against women in leadership. Findings from this study support the notion that in male-dominated political environments, like Malaysia's, traditional views of masculinity as the requirement for leadership positions continue to marginalise women leaders. This further developed the individual bias, which significantly influenced the ability of women to break into political leadership roles. This happens mainly due to the society often questioning their competence based on the ingrained cultural norms (Pratto et al., 2006; Khan, 2023).

Results in Columns 5 and 6 also show another surprising result in which age is negatively and significantly related to the individual bias against female leaders. In other words, older people tend to believe that females make better political leaders than men do. These results are in contrast to the recent work by Kim and Kang (2021).

One of the possible explanations is that the respondents were in the age range from 18 to 80 years old (referring to Table 3). The younger ones might have fewer chances to meet female leaders in jobs where they met most of the females as their teachers or lecturers, who were gentle and young. Furthermore, the younger ones had a lesser political interest in knowing the actual politics in the country. All these reasons might have caused the younger people to think that males were more capable of being leaders compared to females. For the other demographic factors considered in this study, religious denominations and employment, but not marital status and religiosity, were significant in forming the individual bias against female leaders in Malaysia.

The findings have affirmed that demographic variables—namely age, religious affiliation, and employment status—substantially influenced individual bias toward female leaders in Malaysia. In other words, this study has statistically proven that socio-demographic contexts cultivate attitudes toward women in leadership, particularly in traditionally male-dominated domains like politics in the country.

Specifically, our sample reveals that those respondents who are older and more conservative in religious belief tend to exhibit stronger biases against female political leaders. This is consistent with the findings of Inglehart et al. (2003), who argue that cultural values evolve slowly across generations, and that older cohorts socialised in patriarchal systems tend to retain traditional views about gender roles. Such perceptions have consistently become the obstacles for women to hold high-ranking leadership positions, especially when those roles challenge the traditional gender hierarchies.

Besides, the findings also indicate that employment status is one of the determinants of bias towards female leadership. Individuals who are not in the labour force, such as retirees and homemakers, exhibit higher reluctance to accept female leadership. One of the possible explanations is that individuals who are not used to the contemporary workplace cultures are less exposed to organisational policies such as promoting

gender equity or to examples of competent female leaders. Hence, they tend to reinforce outdated gender stereotypes. This explanation is supported by Anglin et al. (2022), who showed that societal roles and occupational engagement help to stimulate gender perceptions, with active workforce participants more likely to endorse inclusive leadership.

Remarkably, this study also finds that younger respondents (i.e., millennials and Gen Z) are more likely to accept female leadership. This modernization shift mirrors broader societal changes, such as increasing female participation in education and employment, which may regularize female leadership and erode long-standing biases. Nevertheless, while this trend is promising, it does not eliminate the systemic cultural inertia that exists in older or more conservative subgroups, especially where traditional religious values intersect with rigid gender stereotypes (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

In a nutshell, these results shed light on the importance of intersectional demographic analysis when addressing leadership biases. They hint that strategies to improve gender equality in leadership require adjustments not only at the institutional levels, but also at the cultural and generational levels. Public policy, civic education, and media have the potential to reshape how different social groups perceive and accept female leadership.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study focused on examining the roles of gender stereotypes, political culture, and demographics in stimulating the biases against females in political leadership positions in Malaysia. The findings suggested that masculine leadership continues to delay the advancement of females in the political sector. Additionally, this study also showed that there were widespread entrenched gender stereotypes in the prevailing political culture, hampering females from being perceived as capable political leaders compared to their male counterparts.

The findings also revealed that younger individuals with higher educational attainment are more willing to accept females in political leadership. This implies that shifts in societal norms may gradually diminish gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, deep-rooted cultural norms and traditional beliefs still present significant obstacles to welcoming female leadership.

This study calls for collective efforts to challenge these stereotypes and transform the male-dominant political culture into a more inclusive environment that allows females to be involved in political leadership. Such a transformation is required in building a more representative and inclusive political landscape. In view of this, this study suggests that eliminating gender stereotypes by transcending gender-based limitations and fully harnessing the capacities of all individuals, regardless of gender, is a necessary step in promoting greater gender equity in politics.

The merging of age and gender roles constitutes a multidimensional domain (Hentschel et al., 2019) with significant theoretical implications, especially when examining through the lens of social role theory, role congruity theory, and their influence on political orientations. Therefore, such interaction between gender norms and age stereotypes provides a convincing conceptual framework for understanding societal expectations of leaders.

A firm standpoint appears after thoroughly examining these determinants based on the framework of older individuals occupying political roles. Although it could be expected that older women may face less scrutiny due to their caregiving roles, role congruity theory suggests that older men may benefit from enduring perceptions of themselves as leaders and decision makers (Anglin et al., 2022; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schock et al., 2019). Consequently, age may be perceived as a form of value, representing accumulated experience and a sense of wisdom.

Theoretically, these observations challenge an oversimplified view that "age generally brings advantages to older female leaders in politics". In contrast, the findings display that the interaction between gender and age significantly contributes to the formation of perceptions of political leadership. By considering and accepting the complexity of these factors, it is possible to construct a more comprehensive theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of the interaction between gender and age in the political context.

For future studies, researchers may consider exploring how the different gender perceptions could help in formulating political stereotypes. It would be valuable to blend in the understanding of the male counterparts, political views, and other socio-economic considerations in this area of study. It is imperative to further study the gender stereotypes and perceptions of women's bias in political leadership to gain deeper insights into the rationale behind why gender stereotypes remain an issue to the present day. With changing perceptions, future studies may further examine how such perceptual shifts contribute to the diminishing of gender inequality in the political arena.

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